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**AFRICAN DANCE IN ENGLAND –  
SPIRITUALITY and CONTINUITY**

**Two Volumes  
Volume 1**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Comparative Cultural Studies**

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## **Declaration**

Appendix 1, Does London need a Centre for Black Dance was commissioned by the Arts Council England (ACE), London and some of it has been published on the website of ACE, London.

I declare that the research presented in this thesis is entirely my own work and that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.



## **Abstract**

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British misunderstood African cultural practices and reported on those in derogatory terms. With other European nations they projected Africans as ‘savages’ without any cultural traditions and consistently devalued traditional African religions and dances. Those views have seeped into the psychology of the British mentality and specifically, may have negatively influenced African dance development in the UK.

This thesis seeks to address those issues through a re-examination of the literature and a re-appraisal of Africa’s religions and dance forms. It will illustrate that in spite of the continuous attempts to decimate African cultural expression, Africa’s cultural practices survived and re-emerged in the Caribbean through slavery and through vibrant practice. The adaptation of the forms in their new environment, especially through adopting some aspects of Christian worship, nurtured alternative ways that later enabled the forms to find expression, as theatrical dance, in the UK.

The thesis is informed by international field trips, through the use of video and Internet sources, from attendances at African and Caribbean cultural events, through a wide range of secondary sources and from interviews spanning over twelve years. It is presented in two main sections. Section one includes the Introduction and chapters One and Two. The Introduction provides a backdrop of current issues in African dance development and chapters One and Two provide a framework of African cultural practice on the continent and in the Caribbean, indicating how European perceptions of the people and their practices skewed the truth. Chapters Three and Four provide a detailed account of African dance development over the past fifty years through the activities of performance companies and support agencies. Chapter Five investigates dance development in the UK, specifically focusing on the works of two London-based choreographers and exploring how their spirituality determines their practice.

## **Abbreviations**

ACE	Arts Council England
ADAD	African Dance in the African Diaspora
ADD	African Dance in the Diaspora
Adzido	Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble
APD	African Peoples' Dance
APO	Afro-People's Organisation
BDDT	Black Dance Development Trust
CAD	Contemporary African Dance
CAVE	Community and Village Entertainment
DA	DanceAfrica
DLA	Danse de L'Afrique
Ekome	Ekome Music and Dance Company
HCC	Handsworth Cultural Centre
IRIE!	IRIE! Dance Theatre
JNDTC	Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company
Kokuma	Kokuma Dance Theatre Company
Lanzel	Lanzel Afrikan Arts
MAAS	Minority Arts Advisory Service
RGS	Royal Geographical Society
TAD	Traditional African Dance
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
UYA	Unemployed Youth Activities

But more than any combination of steps, African dance has an urgency. The dancer has direction and purpose. The purpose is to communicate. This is why he can assume the proportions of an ant or a giant. For him and for his people, the dance is life!<sup>1</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **(1) Literature Review and Research Methodology**

The term African dance<sup>2</sup> triggers a wide range of emotional responses and elicits definitions and observations ranging from the naïve to the outlandish, within some sections of the dance fraternity in contemporary England. As there is no clearly delineated, distinctive framework or theoretical insights to underpin African dance practice in England, these responses appear quite understandable and even appropriate. Yet African dance, and other social aspects of African life, surfaced within British culture centuries ago and today continue to find expression in modern Britain, though more as a minor element of the cultural patchwork quilt, rather than a central theme in a culturally diverse nation. Continental Africans and Africans from the diaspora significantly contribute to the economic and cultural development of Britain's multi-cultural society yet the creativity and artistic contributions of these communities tend to remain at the margins of British society. It is against this backdrop of misunderstanding and cultural neglect that this dissertation, *African Dance in England: Spirituality and Continuity* is presented, and given the paucity of available material, this introduction is

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<sup>1</sup> Pearl Primus, 'African Dance' in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. by Kariamu Welsh Asante (Trenton, NJ and Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998), pp. 3 -11 (p.5).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, African dance, used interchangeably with black dance in the British context, will be used as a shorthand generic term to refer to the dances from the entire continent of Africa, though the emphasis in this thesis is on African dance principally from Ghana and Nigeria, West Africa. Later in this introduction, variations of African dance development will be classified either through their vocabulary or presentation. African dance in this context means music, dance, drama, story telling and associated other arts practice.



more detailed in providing a background for the development of the central theme of the thesis.

The continent of Africa is vast, complex and multi-cultural<sup>3</sup> with almost every ethnic group having numerous dances. To define African dance therefore seems impossible, especially if that attempt is to produce a single definition that would be readily acceptable. Yet, for rather obscure reasons, debates seeking ‘definiteness’ about what is African dance percolates every level within funding agencies, dance institutions and a network of venues and promoters in England. In spite of these, the thesis will offer a practical approach towards an understanding of one aspect of African dance practice, to advance African dance development in the UK.

Within the British context, the practiced forms that were rehearsed and choreographed in London, first appeared on the public stages in the mid-nineteen forties and then with more visibility in the nineteen seventies.<sup>4</sup> The particular dance forms in the mid-forties combined vocabulary primarily from the Caribbean (from rituals which evolved during and after slavery) and from West Africa (Ghana and Nigeria), though with no specificity about a definite geographical region or particular style. Later, with more continental African tutors working in England, the preponderance was West African. However as Georgiana Gore has cautioned, “to speak of West African dance is in fact a misnomer”<sup>5</sup> given that, for example, the word *dance* and the word *choreography* are translated and conceived differently by different ethnic communities, even within countries on the African continent. Though not under-estimating that complexity, the thesis will

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<sup>3</sup> The geographical land size of the continent of Africa can physically accommodate Argentina, the U.S.A, almost all of India, China and Europe.

<sup>4</sup> There were Africans in Scotland and England performing at Royal occasions in 1505 and later, visiting black dance companies, principally from the USA, from the end of the nineteenth century. This latter practice continues to the present time.

<sup>5</sup> Georgiana Gore, ‘Traditional dance in West Africa’ in *Dance History: An Introduction*, ed. by Janet Adshead-Lansdale and June Layson (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59-80 (p.59).



systematically tease out the underlying threads of the development of the forms in England, especially as the contributions from Ghana and Nigeria have been prominent and practiced for several decades.

Initially, African dance found expression in the black churches and later developed amongst the 'youths' in the wider black communities. The emergence of the practice mushroomed, not through formal dance training institutions, but through the sacred and secular activities of black churches, black youths in community centres, and urban and rural drummers and dancers from the Caribbean and the African continent who settled in the UK from the 40s. The forms that eventually found expression in the public arena as social and theatrical dances were therefore both sacred and secular. As Harold Courlander observed in Haiti,

The ceremonial occasion may be the christening of a new set of drums, after which the evening is devoted to singing and dancing. This is a religious event. Sometimes the distinction between religious and profane dancing is vague, but I believe the test is one of the attitude involved...<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, as will be explored in detail later in this thesis, African theatrical dance emerged because of 'black attitudes' towards marginalisation and discrimination in British cities.

Critical discourses and debates amongst practitioners about this specific dance genre have receded significantly since the mid-nineties and have almost disappeared from the public arena. Additionally, the rapidly changing arts funding system, the lack of African dance reportage in the media, its invisibility in high profile dance venues, the absence of visible, stable, professional companies, the lack of distinguished choreographers and its infrequency on the dance calendar have aggregated to pinpoint the fact that the forms appear to be losing their foothold in contemporary Britain. Nonetheless, the forms

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Courlander, 'Dance and Dance-Drama in Haiti', in *The function of dance in Human society: a seminar directed by Franziska Boas* (New York: The Boas School, 1944), pp. 35-45 (p.41).

themselves, regardless of intellectual debate about nomenclature and invisibility are still practiced in England, but as mainstream funding for dance becomes more and more competitive, questions about its validity in modern Britain are being voiced. What is African dance in England, what is its future in multi-cultural Britain and what are the essential characteristics that will determine whether it remains differentiated from or become amalgamated with other forms of dance within the cultural fabric of culturally diverse 'Cool Britannia'?

This thesis is approached and presented from an alternative perspective to that taken by many current thinkers in England. The thesis incorporates ideas and concepts from history, social and cultural anthropology, race relations, religion and particularly African religious practices, to critically locate the position of African dance in modern Britain. Approached from a stance that argues that the continuity of the forms owes much to the spirituality of its practitioners, the thesis will highlight how dances from Africa survived the Middle passage and re-emerged in Britain through the continuity of practice of traditional and syncretic religions. However, the re-emergence of the forms, as social and theatrical activities, were directly linked to the community activities of black political activists and thus gained credence outside the black churches. Increased interest in the form organically manifested itself primarily amongst young, discontented black people within inner cities around the UK who were finding it difficult to articulate their political aspirations through verbal communications and debates. Dance, this form of body language, provided a group activity for the like-minded. As the social anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown noted, dancing together generated unity amongst groups, and though he was not commenting on dance development in England, his reference to the activity as a kind of 'tribal solidarity' certainly resonated, and was reflected in, Africa dance development in the UK.



Black people were facing difficulties and experiencing the effects of racism in a variety of ways and for the youths, communicating through the 'body', rather than through the formal education system was a more viable solution. In her *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*, Drid Williams noted

that it is the case that because the body languages of dancing and dances are less likely to be understood as social and political *statements* than are verbal utterances about them, dissonant statements are often couched in these forms of body languages, with the result that attitudes and beliefs which might otherwise be severely punished manage to maintain a cognitive and conative reality that is denied them in the spoken and bodily languages of the dominant establishment, whatever it may be.<sup>7</sup> [Her italics]

Williams' assertion that the communicative powers of the human body to send messages of protest is 'less likely to be understood' appears to be a culture-specific statement for the potency of the drum and the energy of African dancers (and slaves in the past), had caused the British and other European governments to ban drumming and dancing on many islands in the Caribbean for fear that involvement in those activities led to violent uprisings. In England, many who were initially involved in African dancing in the 70s were the young and disenfranchised and though they were not overtly conscious that they were couching dissonant statements against the dominant establishment, they were acutely aware that they were implanting Caribbean and African arts on the cultural landscape, through their involvement in African dance. They were *politically* conscious that they were a part of the black communities nationally who were agitating against racism and prejudice. Therefore, in the seventies, when African dance became increasingly visible in England, it came via the youths and represented a form of non-violent and creative protest rather than serious artistic endeavour. African dance then, in its second stage of development in England,

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<sup>7</sup> Drid Williams, *Ten lectures on Theories of the Dance* (Metuchen, N.J., & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1991), p.124.

presented itself as *ghetto dance with attitude*. The change from ‘tribal solidarity’ to more choreographic and creative performances came later.

The thesis will examine the relationship between religious practice, spirituality and the continuity of African dance practice in England. By its very nature, it will include an original contribution to the development of African dance in England. It is informed by primary and secondary sources, national and international field trips, television documentaries, interviews and the author’s personal involvement in African dance development over many years. It focuses on the core values and essences of sacred and secular dance practice and examines how Caribbean and African religious practices enabled the forms from the west coast of Africa to find expression in England. The central thrust of the work argues that African dance in contemporary England is a phenomenon that grew directly out of slavery.

Although the literature relating to African history, slavery and the contributions of African civilisation to world cultures is today voluminous, information on African dance specifically is extremely sparse. Thus there were two major problems in approaching this work. Firstly, there is a paucity, indeed, almost no available written material relating to the subject matter in England and secondly, the material relating to African dance *per se* had to be gleaned from rather obscure sources. A considerable amount of time was spent on researching government reports, personal diaries, travelogues, observations by medical doctors, reports from missionaries and writings from botanists as well as other historical documentation.



Published in England, *Black Dance*<sup>8</sup> by Edward Thorpe (1989) includes one chapter, 'Black Dance in Britain'. In spite of the chapter's title, this provided an under-researched, historical overview of what essentially existed in London. Furthermore, it offered no analysis or differentiation between black people who dance and black or African dance as culture-specific art forms.

From America, Lynne Emery's book, *Black Dance, From 1619 to Today*<sup>9</sup> provided a very good historical insight into black dance and its emergence from a terrible period of suppression. It remains one of the very few exceptions in the field, though Katherine Dunham, a respected African-American dance artiste, felt that she should highlight in the *Foreword* of the book, "in these times it may be surprising to many that Mrs. Emery is not black".<sup>10</sup>

Today this position is being addressed as more African-Americans, Africans and Africans in the diaspora have seriously begun to address the imbalance and bias and produce more pertinent literature relating to African dance. Kariamuw Welsh Asante, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Alphonse Tiérou, Albert M. Opoku, J.H.K. Nketia, Germaine Acogny and Omófolábo S. Àjàyí, amongst others, have contributed in this specific area. As yet this body of work is extremely small but growing and many of their contributions will be referred to throughout this dissertation.

Within the Caribbean there have been several articles in the *Jamaican Journal*<sup>11</sup> relating to dance development and Rex Nettleford (Jamaica) and Molly Ahye (Trinidad and

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (London: Dance Books, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Dunham, 'Foreword' in *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, op. cit. pp. vii-viii (p.viii).

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Sheila Barnett, 'Jonkonnu – Pitchy Patchy', *Jamaica Journal*, no.43 (March 1979), 18-32; 'Rex Nettleford talks to Shirley Maynier Burke about ISLANDS', *Jamaica Journal*, vol.19 no.3 (August – October 1986), 13-20.

Tobago) in particular have published significant texts on the development of dance in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago respectively. Hilary Carty, the former Dance Director of Arts Council England, published a practical guide, following a period of research in Jamaica, in *Folk Dances of Jamaica: An Insight*. Black scholars in Britain have published no significant material on any aspect of African dance in the UK, although there are currently a number of students researching in this specific field.

## (2) Towards an Understanding of African Dance Development in the UK

In this thesis, African dance relates to the development and professional practice of the forms by Africans from the continent or from the diaspora, including black<sup>12</sup> people in the New World. This focus is on *professional development*, i.e. *the attitude* towards the practiced form as an explicit *art form* by these groups, though there is recognition that there are others, including participants from different cultural traditions, involved in training and practice in sacred and secular forms.

Funmi Adewole suggests that in order to understand African dance one should study Africa itself, for

In terms of Dance, 'Africa' has come to be used as a symbol or metaphor. It refers more to a 'philosophical construct' than to the real geographical space. From the geographical space is drawn the vocabulary, the symbols, the evidence to support the construct in question.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis within this thesis is on the critical examination of the 'particularised' forms as they emerged as 'social protest' in England coupled with the 'philosophical construct' and the manifestation of the form today.

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<sup>12</sup> The word black is used throughout this dissertation to refer specifically to black Africans on the continent or in the diaspora. It is acknowledged that many may not accept this particular label for themselves. It should also be noted that it is not used in the popular political British format, referring to all people of colour facing disadvantage and discrimination.

<sup>13</sup> Funmi Adewole, 'African/theatre dance: Aesthetics, Discourses and the Stage', *Choreologica Journal: Papers on dance history*, Issue no. 4 (2002), 37-54 (p.37).



The influence of an African dance vocabulary (slightly bent angular rather than linear body, pelvis thrusts, feet patterns etc) can be positively witnessed in a range of dance styles: in contemporary modern dance, in jazz, in Lindy Hop, in Tap Dance and more recently in Hip Hop. African dance has directly contributed to the upsurge in ‘world’ dance and nowhere is that trend more noticeable than in the growing popularity of the Latin rhythms. Although its influence is unmistakable, the emphasis in this thesis is on professional practice that is anchored in and created from a base of spirituality, i.e. dance practice underpinned by a system of beliefs rooted in traditional African religion.

In pursuing this specific course, it has to be noted that African dance emerged in England in a period when black communities were facing a certain degree of hostility and thus their involvement in religious activities permeated their lifestyles and established their social patterns. Harsh social and living conditions meant that black communities were living closer together and bonded to defend themselves. Black families established prayer houses (forerunners of the Caribbean and African churches) to continue their forms of worship, to network with others and to reinforce their spiritual beliefs. “What is commonly called “cottage meetings” were held in Shepherds Bush, Brixton, Hackney and other parts of London”<sup>14</sup> and the Spiritual Baptist Faith, evolved as Patricia Stephens noted, as a “Faith,” a “belief system” that is rooted within an African conceptualisation of religion and a deep spirituality which attests to the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping the Faith and governing the lives of the faithful”.<sup>15</sup>

The Spiritual Baptists were one of many black churches (including the Pilgrim Holiness {later becoming the Wesleyan Holiness}, The New Testament Church of God, The

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<sup>14</sup> Rev. Patricia Stephens, *The Spiritual Baptist Faith: African New World Religious History, Identity & Testimony* (London: Karnak House, 1999), p.17.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.17.



Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim) that were actively involved in the wider black communities and in their social as well as spiritual development. Tribal solidarity, as it did in Africa, expressed itself and accommodated movement and music and the distinction between sacred and secular dance was not an issue for those black communities struggling to establish economic bases for themselves. The communities met and worshipped, sang and danced. As Sterling Stuckey noted of American slave communities

The failure of whites to understand African spiritual and artistic values made it easier for slaves to use dance to exploit crevices in the system of slavery.....Slaveholders never understood that a form of spirituality almost indistinguishable from art was central to the cultures from which blacks came. Distinguishing between the two for the African was like distinguishing between the sacred and the secular, and that distinction was not often made. African religion, therefore, could satisfy a whole range of human needs that for Europeans were splintered into secular compartments.<sup>16</sup>

This satisfaction of 'human needs' through religious practice and dance is not unique to the black race yet it was through this mechanism that African dance established itself on British soil. Stuckey suggests that if you analyse the daily lives of the black communities in the diaspora from slavery to today, one may find that no other group of people has ever *used* so much music and dance in their existence. The sacred and the secular forms merged and were indistinguishable particularly as choreographers working in this specific genre, used symbolism and rituals to maintain a continuity with their African heritage while at the same time offering tangible, visual imagery to increase access and engage their audiences. In England, dancers and musicians coming directly from the African continent also brought with them their particular forms of rituals, symbols and religious practice and these fused, and in some cases, offered more challenging opportunities for social and theatrical performances, when they combined with the Caribbean dance experience.

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<sup>16</sup> P.Sterling Stuckey, 'Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance' in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance*, ed. by Thomas F. DeFrantz (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp.39-58 (p.40).

The reality and practicality of the ‘cross-over’ between sacred and secular dance forms is observable in what Harold Courlander noted in Haiti in the forties and what Ekome Dance Company<sup>17</sup> performed in the eighties in Bristol. In *Dance and Dance-Drama in Haiti*, Harold Courlander recorded dance practice in different social and religious settings in Haiti and wrote that “there are few gatherings, religious or secular, that do not begin or end with dancing”<sup>18</sup> and also in religious dance practice,

When the spirit Adjassou comes in, a man may eat broken glass. When the God of iron and war enters a man’s head, he may pick up bars of red-hot metal and walk in the hot coals of a fire. From such ordeals they seem to emerge unscathed, although to sceptical minds it may seem somewhat unlikely that anyone can, without preparation or trickery, handle boiling or red-hot materials and not be burned.<sup>19</sup>

This form of *sacred dancing* practiced in many cultures in Africa as well as the diaspora was for Ekome, and numerous ‘giggers’<sup>20</sup> in the past forty years in England, *secular dancing*, especially the eating of broken glass and walking barefooted on hot coal. Sacred or secular, trickery or faith, these black performers in England accommodated African dance practice and re-presented them as social entertainment in new settings. Although the dancers themselves may not have been totally aware of the religious context from which the dance was derived, its performance symbolised their direct connections to Africa (their identity).

In African religious dance, as in many dance creations for the theatre, the vocabulary incorporates rituals, symbols, movements and elements of religious practice in codified systems. The dance interacts with the physical and spiritual worlds: it is public and private, secular and sacred, combining in a celebration of movements to specific

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<sup>17</sup> Ekome Dance Company from Bristol was one of the pioneering African dance companies in the mid-seventies.

<sup>18</sup> op. cit. p.36.

<sup>19</sup> ibid. p.44.

<sup>20</sup> See definition (Chapter 3) and examples of giggers in Appendix 2



rhythms. In these aspects, African dance practice remains a coherent, holistic element of one's overall understanding and approach to life. It is, as Alphonse Tiérou<sup>21</sup> stated,

...a perfect manifestation which comes from the intimate union of *cou* and *zou*. The *cou* is the term which defines the body of the dancer when he executes the dance; it is the public part of the dance. The *zou* is the abstract, conceptual part of the dance.

For Jackie Guy

There are three things that must be retained in the dance, no matter where you dance. The first is the connection between the dancers and the musicians. The second is the 'conversation' - that is, the dancers acknowledging the musicians and getting a response; the 'stage' acknowledging the audience and getting a response - and then the third, is the praise to God and the ancestors.<sup>22</sup>

Guy, the former artistic director of Kokuma, was talking about his understanding and choreographic presentations of African theatrical dance for the stages of middle-scale British venues, and the necessity to maintain the spiritual aspects of the practiced forms.

In general, African dancers maintain a slightly bent body, dance with flat feet and have a direct and interactive relationship with the musicians. More often than not, live drumming and other percussive instruments accompany the dance. The ritual includes calling on gods and ancestors, pouring libation, sanctifying the space of performance and interpreting specific and accurately defined rhythms with co-ordinated body movements. Discussion of specific dances will be explored in chapter five when examining the work of two London-based African choreographers.

For the professional African dance practitioner, the form is vibrant and evolving and carries coded signs and co-signs that have significance for specific communities.

According to Funmi Adewole,

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<sup>21</sup> Alphonse Tiérou, *Dooplé: The Eternal Law of African Dance* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992), p.13.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Jackie Guy, Birmingham 6 April 2002. Guy is a London-based freelance choreographer, lecturer and dance teacher. I invited him from Jamaica to Birmingham to work with Kokuma. He became the Artistic Director and successfully led the company for seven years. He was a member of the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica for several years.

I come from Nigeria. Because I dance, I try to understand the meaning of gestures and the subtleties of hand and body movements of the dances from other ethnic groups. My mother for example is not a Yoruba and therefore she does not understand all the nuances of their dances or of any other ethnic group. Quite often she would describe dancing from other communities as poor simply because she does not understand it. That's why African dance is not about learning some steps and repeating them. It really is about those specific and communicative movements and their meanings to a particular ethnic community.<sup>23</sup>

In pointing out the necessity to understand the subtleties of 'body languages' in dance, Drid Williams argued that it required a degree of sophistication and identified ten points that she considered to be essential to the debate. She viewed dancing as a "certain kind of symbolic transformation of experience" and added that "if the *code* of the body language is not understood, then the empirically perceived messages will be misunderstood".<sup>24</sup> (Her italics). As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the codes of African dances were, and possibly still remain, largely misunderstood in England, hence the perpetual need for definitions about the practice. African dance has not been codified or notated in any formal manner,<sup>25</sup> but its transplantation and continuity, linked to its religious belief systems, have been well established for centuries, through regularity of practice.

In offering a practical approach to minimise confusion and increase accessibility for understanding African dance development in Britain, the practiced forms will be classified as African Dance in the Diaspora (ADD), though the particular form will be directly linked to either its functional role in society or to a specific ethnic group and geographical location. This classification includes forms that are being practiced

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Funmi Adewole, London 3 March 2003. Adewoli is a performer and researcher in African dance.

<sup>24</sup> op. cit. p.190.

<sup>25</sup> Currently Jean Johnson-Jones, Surrey University Dance Department, is working with others in the field on codifying and notating African dance forms. This work is in its embryonic stages but will undoubtedly contribute to the continuity of traditional African dance practice in the New World and improve the quality of development in England.

throughout the Americas, in Europe or elsewhere, absorbing as it were external influences, but maintaining all the essential elements as previously detailed. The term is self-defining and can be more geographically explicit by referencing forms to their particular locality, for example, ADD - England or ADD – Jamaica, followed by the specific dance, say *Gahu* or *Kumina* etc. The classical ballet *Giselle* performed by the Houston Ballet in Washington or by Birmingham Royal Ballet remains the same dance, although the interpretation and presentational styles by the two companies may be different. Similarly a performance of *Sango* in Trinidad will have variances with a *Sango* in Nigeria, but participants and informed audiences of both genres, will be able to recognise the similarity of the dances through the techniques, meanings, core essences, rituals and symbols. Understandably, there is an '*ADD*' factor in the transition and development of the forms in new geographical locations but the core values, specificity and meaning of the form to its practitioners and audience remain almost intact. Brenda Dixon Gottschild talks about "...intertextuality, the fact that cultures influence each other, and their products, processes, and people cross paths and exchange information in ways that we see and in ways that are invisible yet felt".<sup>26</sup>

This practical approach reduces confusion and promotes clarity whilst recognising that the forms have been influenced by external factors. African Dance in the Diaspora will be grouped under two broad categories. The classification acknowledges that if the form practiced has quite clear and unequivocal African foundations, then it is classed under one of these two categories. The emphasis is on the form, its meaning and precision of execution within a specific context. Thus stated, the form will be classed either as Traditional African Dance (TAD) or Contemporary African Dance (CAD).

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<sup>26</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), p.47.



TAD refers to practice that maintains its repertoire when it is transferred from traditional African communities to performance spaces ‘outside’ of this setting. For instance, a dancer in England researches and re-presents a dance that he/she has practiced or observed on the continent. The dancer expresses creativity in reproducing the traditional form through the execution of floor patterns. In this sense he/she is not a choreographer but a “dance arranger” of traditional dance practice. The presentation maintains its ‘narrative’ and provides a context of a particular community. This maintains the traditional form in the diaspora and ensures that besides the exactitude of the vocabulary in terms of gestures and symbols, costuming, musical accompaniment, religious and spiritual invocations, the forms provide continuity, meaning and a ‘re-affirmation of self’ for various black communities in the diaspora. Adzido Pan- African Dance Ensemble, AfiDance, ADANTA and Abasindi Dancers and Drummers etc., most notably mirror the TAD movement in England.

Though many critics have maligned the TAD movement as “archaic and without relevance today”<sup>27</sup> Kariamu Welsh Asante in her work *Zimbabwe Dance*, although referring to a particular ethnic group on the continent, noted that

Zimbabwean dance is African dance, it is southern, it is Zimbabwean history, it is religion, it is cosmology, and, as such, it is a canon by which the cultural phenomena of the arts in Africa can be examined. The transformation of traditional dance forms to concert dance forms in many ways chronicled Zimbabwean history.<sup>28</sup>

TAD practice in the UK is not a fossilised form but there is an argument that in post-modern Britain, these dances are outdated, irrelevant and do not have a marketplace. Yet TAD forms have a valid function from several perspectives, though the modernists and most funders appear reluctant to accept this view. The performance and teaching of

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<sup>27</sup> This feeling has been expressed on several occasions in interviews with white members on the Boards of African dance companies and with the Directors of some of the Regional Dance Agencies in Britain.

<sup>28</sup> Kariamu Welsh Asante, *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices – An Aesthetic Analysis* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: 2000), p.18.

traditional dance forms are essential to the overall continuity and future development of African dance in the UK. They provide an introduction to basic African dance vocabulary, a re-orientation in the 'use' of the human body within this genre and a greater understanding of the various relationships between dance and music and the practiced forms and its audiences. TAD introduces rituals and symbols which are still significant to 'black' audiences/communities and underpins that 'functionalist role' necessary for their cultural and spiritual upliftment in the life cycle from birth to death. Traditional dance practice is positive affirmation and identification for many in multi-cultural Britain and already has an audience that could grow substantially. The presentation styles of the TAD forms (generally display dancing) lend themselves to a much wider range of venues including festivals, open-air concerts, site-specific projects and most importantly teaching within educational establishments and institutions. The form is evolving and though much of what is observed can be technically improved and better presented, there is still a case for its continuation and public subsidy, within dance practice in the UK. An independent institution for the development and promotion of African dance in the UK would radically improve the status and appreciation of the forms.

Secondly, there is CAD, in which one is witnessing new styles and interpretation, though the centrality of the creative work is pinned firmly to theoretical insights from traditional African religion and philosophy. Practitioners are part of and have lived within the 'coded' environments and thus articulate a new and exciting vocabulary, which addresses many of today's issues through the utilisation and re-presentation of the religious belief systems of the continent. Currently choreographers such as H. Patten, Bode Lawal and Peter Badejo are leading this particular movement. They research their material, audition and 'school and coach' performers in *a specific dance*



*vocabulary* rather than in the generality of traditions. Contemporary African dance utilises techniques and principles from Western dance practice to complement an evolving modern dance idiom by African practitioners themselves, not as vocabulary to replace traditional movements and techniques. These choreographers are committed to the development of the form in the UK and the work of Patten and Badejo will be explored further in chapter five. It can be said that the '*CAD*' movement is using contemporary techniques to take the forms forward, very much in the manner of 'Computer-Aided-Designs'.

### (3) **British Attitudes to African Dance**

In British society, dance is not a mainstream activity and if Pearl Primus's earlier quote about the African and the meaning of dance for him is correct, for the British, dance is not life! It is however, a highly stratified sector with classical ballet firmly perched at the top and tapering downwards to a fragmented and under-resourced array of companies and individuals. Not surprisingly, African dance in England is therefore a minority form within a minority activity.

Professionally, the form does not attract many young black or white British dancers. The reasons for this are many and complex and may have much to do with its relative invisibility on the stage, its low profile in the media and legacies relating to the historical view of the forms. For centuries, European nations considered the inhabitants of the African continent 'primitive' and devalued their dance practices. As Leonard E. Barrett noted

The debasing manner in which African slaves were brought to the new world and the inhumane conditions under which they were forced to work, for centuries provided a climate in which it was unfashionable for scholars to inquire into their cultural, social or political background....Such scholarship would have been seen as either the work of a depraved person or a would-be conspirator. So the accepted type of scholarship during slavery was that which

demonstrated by situational logic that the slaves were inherently inferior. In fact, until the latter half of twentieth century this was thought to be the acceptable way to deal with Africans in the New World, and the literature of this *genre* abounds both in Europe and in America.<sup>29</sup>

Europeans commenting on dance in Africa followed a very Western, formal approach when observing the practice and ignored the religious and functional aspects and the context of the activities. Thus the critique's views were never holistic but were confined only to their *observations of rhythmic dance movements*. Their lack of understanding of the African's external, emotional displays, symbols and gestures and the internal values of their religious belief systems resulted in consistent criticisms; they did not appreciate that African dance was used both as a 'functional' as well as a 'spiritual' form of expression.<sup>30</sup>

African dance forms generally in the New World were dismissed in a similar manner. Practitioners of *Sango*<sup>31</sup> in Trinidad and Tobago, *Kumina*<sup>32</sup> in Jamaica, *Santería* in Cuba, *Voodoo* in Haiti, *Candomblé* in Brazil, were punished for their dance practice and belief systems that developed both in opposition to and alongside Christianity. As Kariamu Welsh Asante reported from her work on dances in Zimbabwe, "in decoding the dances of Africa in order to read the "text", one must be very careful not to confuse the process of decoding with the process of interpretation".<sup>33</sup> British writers were unable to decode the dances they witnessed; hence their interpretations lacked authenticity.

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<sup>29</sup> Leonard E. Barrett, *Soul Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Drid Williams differentiates between understanding the function of a dance and understanding the dance itself i.e. differences in 'function' and 'meaning'.

<sup>31</sup> Sango (pronounced Shango) by the Yoruba communities of West Africa.

<sup>32</sup> From the Congo region of Africa.

<sup>33</sup> Kariamu Welsh Asante, *Zimbabwe Dance*, op. cit. p.90.

#### (4) African Dance in England: An overview

African dance remains in a period of gestation insofar as the ebbing and flowing of the policies of the funding agencies have controlled the development and practice of the theatrical and dramatic forms. Key decisions affecting professional companies and individuals are often delivered as dictates rather than the results of joint discussions, the former creating instability for practitioners and companies and frequently stifling the creative process. As a result, the numbers of professional companies and individuals involved in African dance have dwindled considerably over the past few years. The smaller groups and individuals within TAD forms are not generally funded and they continue to survive in a wide range of dance/‘non-dance’ spaces and within educational institutions.

There appears to be no strategic or coherent view by the arts agencies with respect to African dance in Britain and Caroline Muraldo has suggested that “...there needs to be a move away from the careless use of the generic terms ‘African people’s dance’, ‘African dance’, ‘black dance’ and ‘contemporary’ in favour of much more apposite terms”.<sup>34</sup> However Muraldo only referred to the superficial problems of labelling the forms as a genre and missed the opportunity to locate the discussion in the context of ‘funding’ and in the wider society, vis-à-vis their acceptance and treatment of African and Caribbean communities and *their relationship to African dance*. African dance surfaced as ‘tribal solidarity’ rooted in the churches and black communities. These communities still remain largely responsible for creating and providing their own social and cultural activities for consumption by the communities themselves, hence defining or agreeing ‘more apposite terms’ will not necessarily result in a dynamic new

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<sup>34</sup> Caroline Muraldo, ‘Terminological Inexactitude’, *Dance Theatre Journal*, vol. 19 no.1 (2003), 32-36 (p.36).



approach to this genre of dance in England, especially as the black communities still remain on the fringes of mainstream cultural provision.

In recent times, many, including major funders, question the validity and role of African dance in contemporary society and its value to young black people in England. Some quietly assert that if the forms are to have a future, dance practitioners should adopt a postmodern approach to parallel white British dance development and should seek inspiration from Europe or black America rather than Africa. If as many professional practitioners believe, the source for development and continuity is in Africa, then there is an enormous gap between the thought processes of funders and the creative thinking of practitioners.

For myriad reasons there has been confusion between *skin colour* and *dance forms* i.e. black people who dance and black dance. This confusion about skin colour and form<sup>35</sup> is not a recent event and was a critical factor in the establishment of the first Caribbean African Dance Company, Les Ballets Negres, in England. According to Leon Robinson<sup>36</sup> the name of the company itself was a *political* as well as an *artistic* decision as Berto Pasuka, the company's Artistic Director, wanted to share the diversity and richness of the dances of the Caribbean and Africa, without them being relegated to an inferior position. Pasuka therefore adopted the 'exotic' French language with the emphatic use of the word ballet. Robinson indicated that at the time of the formation of Les Ballets Negres, "Paris was the cultural capital of the world and Berto wanted the

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<sup>35</sup> As an aside, it is interesting to note that white contemporary dance, as developed by Martha Graham in America in the 1940s, created a stir in a similar manner about 'what is contemporary dance' but that soon dissipated, enabling the Graham technique to become one of the world's most respected techniques today.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Leon Robinson, London 1 February 2002. Robinson is in possession of a quantity of artefacts from Les Ballets Negres and is currently archiving that material. A keen researcher of Les Ballets Negres, he became a very close friend of Richie Riley and many others from Les Ballets Negres and provided some very useful insights into the development and performances of the company. He has been interviewed on several occasions throughout the writing of this dissertation.

opportunity to present his work there and be accepted as a part of that new, world culture”.<sup>37</sup>

Twenty years later, Felix Cobbson from Ghana, was offering African dance and music as extra-mural activities in Essex. The media’s response was ‘predictable’, describing his work as “Jungle Beat – Straight from Ghana”<sup>38</sup>, “The War Drums of Essex”<sup>39</sup> and “Out of Africa – Tribal Rhythms”.<sup>40</sup> Cobbson vacated his teaching post and established a Ghanaian music and dance training centre, Aklowa<sup>41</sup> in Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire in 1970. In an article entitled ‘Dancing for an O-level’ in *the Evening Standard*, it reported

Jungle drums throb out their compulsive rhythms. Young white girls bend and whirl gracefully to the African music...It’s the sound of pupils of Stewards Comprehensive School revising for their O-level exams. And it is the only school in Europe where you can study African Drums and Dance to A-level.<sup>42</sup>

No credit was reserved for Felix Cobbson as an entrepreneur for this ‘European first’, though the reporting was exact in noting that ‘white girls bend and whirl gracefully to the African music’. Europeans, as will be examined in later chapters, generally referred to black girls and black people involved in their traditional dance forms, in a less than flattering manner.

In the intervening years up to 1970, African dance practice continued with a few organised groups as well as through informal and ad hoc Caribbean and African groups presenting *cabaret* performances.<sup>43</sup> These dancers maintained a presence, if not a high

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Leon Robinson, London 1 February 2002.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Jungle Beat – Straight from Ghana’, *The Gazette*, 2 April 1965, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The War Drums of Essex’, *The Sunday Times*, 8 December 1974, p.30.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Out of Africa’, *Evening Echo*, 17 July 1986, p.14.

<sup>41</sup> Aklowa is a Ga word which means village. The Aklowa Centre offers specific Ghanaian arts programmes for educational and performance purposes.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Dancing for an O-level’, *Evening Standard*, 24 February 1976, p.13.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Alex Pascall, London 1 February 2002. Alex Pascall, originally from Grenada, is a well-known cultural historian who has been living and working in the arts and media in London since the

profile, and ensured continuity. With the arrival of more immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa and an upsurge in community arts events and black political awareness, the numbers of dance groups begun to increase. The dance forms at that period in time were invariably referred to as *West Indian Dance*, later becoming *Caribbean Dance* and then *Afro-Caribbean Dance* as more and more Caribbean islands gained their independence. Psychologically, there was a new awakening in the definition of 'self' and an increased awareness and spiritual connectivity between black people in the Caribbean, Africa and in the New World generally. Racial violence in North America was increasing and though at that time black was not frequently used in a dance context, the word assumed new and significant meaning in black life in England.

In 1974 there was a boost for African dance. Steel an' Skin<sup>44</sup> were teaching nationally and Barry Anderson<sup>45</sup> and his sisters exploded onto the dance scene as Ekome Dance Company. An African name for a Caribbean community dance group and a repertoire of African dances was new and exciting. Ekome emerged to fill the gap left by Les Ballets Negres. By 1975 Lancel African Arts was established in Wolverhampton. Also a community oriented-company, Lancel was firmly rooted in traditional African music and dance and this was a small but major shift in dance development, as the companies aligned themselves with Africa and a new dance vocabulary. Politically and spiritually these two groups planted a new foothold in African dance in England. Many of these young black dancers had accompanied their parents to the black churches for many years and black *spiritual consciousness* was now more pronounced as more groups begun *seeing* themselves with a positive African image and developing an alternative *modus operandi*.

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sixties. As an accomplished drummer himself, he recalls seeing on many occasions the limbo, various snake dances and other variations of 'wining'.

<sup>44</sup> Steel an' Skin operated as a loosely structured music and dance collective, teaching and performing Caribbean and African music and dance. Its members were mostly from the Caribbean and Ghana.

<sup>45</sup> Barry Anderson was the leader and Artistic Director of Ekome Dance Company in Bristol.



In March 1977 with a degree of funding from the Arts Council of England and the Greater London Arts Association, MAAS Movers<sup>46</sup> emerged onto the dance scene. Although not perceived or labelled as an African or Caribbean dance company, the company was composed of all black dancers, almost all coming directly from the Caribbean. Their contribution to the dance evolution fragmented after two years, essentially through the lack of funds and lack of clarity in terms of artistic endeavour. The choreography for most of their work was rooted in the Western, modern technique and Edward Thorpe wrote that after their first performance “the critics gave the company a cautious welcome, realising that the premise should be encouraged but also that, initially, the programmes had to be built around the limited technical abilities of some of the cast”.<sup>47</sup> The critics appeared to be very supportive of the idea of this new, black company, though it has to be pointed out that the form was one that was more easily understood by the British and therefore more acceptable. It appeared that black dancers in Western contemporary dance and white, young dancers in African dance were acceptable.

1977 was a watershed in the development of African dance in England. There was a significant and positive shift in the definition used for the dance form and this was emerging from the black communities through community dance groups. In Birmingham Kokuma<sup>48</sup> was established; in Liverpool, Steel an’ Skin contributed to the establishment of Daledo Dance Company, emerging out of the Toxteth riots in Liverpool in 1981. In 1984, Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, a flagship African

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<sup>46</sup> MAAS was the Minority Arts Advisory Service that provided services relevant to the needs of England’s black arts constituency. MAAS Movers was supported by the Service to establish a performance company.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Thorpe, op. cit. p.175.

<sup>48</sup> I organised and established Kokuma during my period as a Senior Probation Officer in Birmingham. At that time, the young persons who joined were not offenders. See Chapter Three for further details of Kokuma.



Dance Company was established in London under the artistic direction of George Dzikunu and Beverley Glean established IRIE! Dance Theatre, a modern Caribbean company, in London in 1986. African and Caribbean based dance practices were now becoming more popular and groups in Leicester, Birmingham, Northampton, Nottingham, London, Huddersfield, Derby and Sheffield were working with African and Caribbean tutors on the development of traditional forms. More and more dancers and musicians from the continent were available as tutors, and this was impacting the growth of African dance in England. The content of the repertoires at this period overwhelmingly consisted of Ghanaian traditional dances, mainly because of the availability of dancers from that West African country.

The labelling of the dance forms chartered a multi-faceted path, and consciously or otherwise, dance companies adopted *labels* to suit the funding criteria.<sup>49</sup> 'Black is Beautiful' epitomised a heightened sense of black pride and there emerged a new label for black people in dance. In the UK *Black Dance* became the blanket term, subsuming the terms African-Caribbean and African dance, and almost everyone within the African dance community used the term black dance to refer to African dance. In 'black America' the term was in popular usage during the 60s and 70s, singularly because it was viewed as 'dance of the other' i.e. 'non-white dance'. This 'blackness' of the dance form, as Thomas DeFrantz detailed in his work relating to African-American dance, was invented by white critics as a shorthand method of writing about "work they felt uncomfortable with or ill-prepared to address"<sup>50</sup> whilst for Rex Nettleford, Artistic Director of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company (JNDTC), the label black

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<sup>49</sup> As will be seen from the Arts Council's table of funding in Chapter 3, African dance was rarely funded directly from the dance budget but received subsidies from a range of other community and 'race' categories.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, 'African-American Dance: A complex history' in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance*, ed. by Thomas F. DeFrantz (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp.3-38 (p.5).

dance was “yet another term of provocation”.<sup>51</sup> Shorthand or provocation, the continuous labelling of the form in England has always created debates but has yielded no long-term significant gains to practitioners within this particular sector.

Given this broad yet specific use of the term, the African dance companies came together in 1984 and established the Black Dance Development Trust (BDDT). This development created a gap between black dancers and the Trust as some contemporary trained, black, independent dancers and companies were refused membership. The word black, though appropriated from America in a political sense, had come to mean African in terms of dance development in England. Members within the BDDT, in order to further qualify the aims and objectives of the Trust, coined the term African Peoples’ Dance (APD).

There were several conferences in 1993 that posed the question, what is Black Dance in Britain?<sup>52</sup> According to the report from one of these, “we asked the question what is Black Dance in Britain?” and the answer was a resounding rejection of the term Black Dance”<sup>53</sup>, the participants present opting to use the term African Peoples’ Dance which the BDDT had coined. A quick analysis of those present showed that of the sixty four participants present, just over half were black but only a very small percentage were practitioners in Caribbean or African dance forms and the rest, including other black dancers, were primarily involved in Western, modern dance practice, lecturing and teaching or funding and administration. Having rejected the term black dance, the Report continued

There was agreement that African Peoples’ dance forms need a stronger infrastructure, and that an organisation could make a valuable contribution to the

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<sup>51</sup> Rex Nettleford, ‘Afro-Caribbean Dance’, *Dance Study Supplement*, part eight (1990), 1-8 (p.1).

<sup>52</sup> Shaila Parthasarathi, ‘What is Black Dance in Britain?: A meeting for practitioners’, *Report*, April 1993. p.1. This event took place at the Nottingham Playhouse, 8 March 1993.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p.1.

process of developing the infrastructure. Such an organisation would need to have the interest of the *full spectrum of the dance forms* at its heart and be concerned with the needs of the artists, whilst having the skills and resources to provide advocacy, information, training and education in order to promote development in the forms and improved status and recognition for them.<sup>54</sup> [My italics]

According to H. Patten “the term African Peoples’ Dance was hijacked by the white establishment and broadened by their thinking to include almost anyone of colour who danced, regardless of the specific form”.<sup>55</sup> After this conference the label APD assumed a new degree of significance, especially by the dance department of the Arts Council of England. To date no one has been able to define what was meant by ‘the full spectrum of the dance forms’ but what was clearly articulated was that an organisation was needed and that that organisation should provide a wide range of services for the development of African Peoples’ Dance. As the BDDT was no longer operational, a new organisation, Association of Dance in the African Diaspora (ADAD) emerged out of the deliberations in 1993. Though still operational, ADAD has barely benefited from public subsidy and has not made a significant impact satisfying the ‘full spectrum of the dance forms’.

Today, labelling the forms remain as confusing as ever and in a recent discussion with dance officers from ACE, London, it emerged that they now speak of Dance Of Black Origin (DOBO). This label generously accommodates a whole host of disparate dance forms and is neither political, in the sense that many practitioners felt the label black dance was, nor is it clearly defined, allowing therefore both funders and practitioners to define what they seek to do under this extremely broad and accommodating banner.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p.1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with H. Patten, London 4 August 2003. Patten is a dancer and choreographer whose work is detailed in Chapter 5.



## (5) Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness

The focus of this dissertation is towards an understanding of this new phase in African dance development in cosmopolitan England through assessing and analysing the inter-relationships between African dance practice, religious beliefs and spirituality. These inter-relationships, visible throughout periods of slavery, have nurtured and supported Africans throughout the duration of their New World journeys and have spiritually enabled them to fashion new and different lives. “Spirituality” as defined by Carlyle Fielding Stewart “represents the full matrix of beliefs, power, values, and behaviours that shape people’s consciousness, understanding, and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality”<sup>56</sup> and this spirituality has been the cornerstone for the survival and development of African dance in contemporary Britain.

Today, black people whose origins can be traced back to the continent of Africa are to be found almost everywhere in the world. Many are the descendents of slaves taken to Europe and the Americas several centuries ago, and some respect and retain their cultural ties and their direct relationship to their African ancestry. African cultural traditions continue to impact upon global cultural development in several spheres and Carlyle Fielding Stewart in describing African –Americans as ‘soul survivors’ pointed out that

This soul force is manifested in the creation of jazz and blues to the walk, talk, and thought of black folk to the various forms of black resistance in the social, political and personal realms. The point here is that by enabling and nurturing creative and alternative modalities of consciousness, community behaviour, and belief, African – American **spirituality** has engendered the formation of an ethos of consciousness and vitality among blacks that can never be wholly subject to, controlled by, or obliterated by themselves or their adversaries and oppressors.<sup>57</sup> [My emphasis]

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<sup>56</sup> op. cit. p.1.

<sup>57</sup> op. cit. p.122.

This prognosis of the role of spirituality in African–American life is equally applicable to the lifestyles of many black communities in England and, as indicated earlier, the African dance movement in the mid-seventies seriously began as ‘black resistance in the social, political and personal realms’ *i.e. ghetto dance with attitude*. An African presence was pronounced in England for hundreds of years<sup>58</sup> and in spite of the barriers to the open development of African cultural practices, it could be easily deduced that Africans were engaged in social and religious activities, including private and public performances of their dances.

In a similar vein, this spiritual connection with Africa is observed throughout the New World and is pronounced throughout many black communities in the Caribbean. In Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Grenada, Haiti and in Cuba, for example, it is easily identifiable in terms of religious practice, as Natalia Bolivar discussed in the Yoruba religion.

The orisha is pure, immaterial force that is only perceptible to human beings when one of the descendants is chosen by the orisha to be possessed. This is the origin of what much later, through the process of syncretization; we would call in *Regla de Ocha* the *hijo de santo* (child of the saint). The relationship, which is here **spiritual**, was in Africa a blood relationship.<sup>59</sup> [My emphasis]

As will be explored in subsequent chapters, a connection between young, black people in England with people in the Caribbean and Africa cemented itself around African dance and a belief system which they did not fully comprehend but which they accepted as part of their traditional heritage. Traditional African dance, in a dynamic sense,

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<sup>58</sup> For a black presence in Britain dating back to the mid-sixteenth century see F.O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London, New York and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1974) and *Black People in Britain 1555-1833* (London, New York and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977). See also Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain 500 years of Black and Asian History* (London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999). Nigel File and Chris Power’s, *Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958* also provide a useful summary of black life during that period.

<sup>59</sup> Natalia Bolivar, ‘The Orishas in Cuba’ in *Afrocuba: An anthology of Cuban writing on Race, Politics and Culture*, ed. by Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs (Melbourne & New York: Ocean Press, 1993), pp. 137-145 (p.137).

became *a visual realisation of self worth* for many people and opened up new horizons in terms of their purpose and focus in life and in their way of using ‘the body’ to communicate. As Primus said of the African dancer, there was ‘purpose and direction’ and for many blacks in England, a re-emergence of an African identity in a positive context, through their involvement in dance.

Today many Africans in the diaspora are adopting a lifestyle that reflects the cultural traditions of the continent. There is a noticeable increase in the traditional religious practices of Africa and a new assertion of spirituality that is directly nurtured through the increased amounts of ‘places of worship’, the formal and informal networks of cultural associations and the social spaces providing traditional entertainment by Africans. These networks are directly contributing to a revival in traditional dance forms and providing positive support for the creation of exciting contemporary African dance in England; forms that are informed by and sustained through practice of African traditional religious practices.

## **(6) Overview of Thesis**

Chapter one provides a backcloth against which African dance development could be discerned, through an outline of early African culture and civilisation, a broad perspective of the core essences of traditional African religious practice and beliefs and an introduction to dance practice on the continent itself. It reviews some of the early European literature on African dance and provides direct linkages between practiced forms on the continent and their re-emergence in the Caribbean and the UK. It underscores how British and other European writers, over several centuries, misunderstood traditional African cultural practices and thus provided reports and circulated information that were incorrect and in many cases, biased. The chapter



concludes with an outline of the Yoruba religion, as many slaves to the Caribbean originated from Yorubaland (Nigeria and Benin) and Ghana and that specific form of traditional African religious practice has directly impacted dance development in the Caribbean and in the UK.

During the periods of slavery, millions of Africans were physically transported to new environs throughout the world and it is estimated that over sixty million people of African ancestry are now ensconced in the Americas. Chapter two suggests that the forced exercising of slaves during the Middle Passage directly contributed to the maintenance and practice of African dance in the Caribbean and illustrates how the British continued to maltreat Africans in their new homelands. Slaves, free coloureds, free blacks, plantation owners and overseers, all in a new environment, had to develop operational and social systems to minimise conflict and yet be economically productive. What were these relationships, what effect did they have on issues of identity and how did it impact upon dance development? How did Africans throughout slavery and into independent nation states and citizenship determine their cultural pursuits? What, if any, were the relationships between Africans in the diaspora and on the continent?

The chapter will show that traditional religious and dance practice continued in the Caribbean and will identify how these practices emerged in theatrical dance presentations in the UK. The focus of dance development will be on Jamaica and the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago showing how African religious practice encountered and accommodated Christian beliefs and survived. Symbolisms and ritual practices from Africa continued and dances such as *Kumina*, *Voodoo*, *Candomblé*, *Sango*, *Santería* and the *Bongo* emerged and functioned alongside other social dances including the *Quadrille*, the *Bele*, the *Parang*, the *Maypole* and the *Rumba*. In spite of

the negative views of British writers and sections of the black communities themselves, African dance continued to find its own space. Much later, practitioners from Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago were in the forefront of African dance development in the UK.

Chapter three locates dance development in England within the black churches and explores how the forms manifested themselves as social and theatrical forms essentially through youth culture and black community activities. It develops the theme of *ghetto dance with attitude* and provides a detailed study of African dance development in the UK. It identifies some of the pioneers and key players over the past fifty years and suggests that African dance development was, and remains, problematic for the funding agencies, as they themselves have no clear strategy for supporting these forms.

Chapter four will assess the work of Kokuma Dance Company. Although the company was forced to disband at the start of this century, it was the longest continuously established African Caribbean dance company and has made a major contribution to dance practice in the UK. The chapter will also provide an insight into the role of the first African dance agency - the Black Dance Development Trust - and clearly illustrate that in spite of its many achievements, its demise indirectly hastened the closure of several other dance companies that relied on the Trust for organisational and training support. It will conclude with some thoughts on the positioning and development of a new agency, DanceAfrica, to underpin infrastructure development of the forms primarily in London.

Chapter five will demonstrate how spirituality, accommodation, adaptations and ‘intertextuality’ are evolving in practice through the creative energies and visions of two

practitioners. It will focus on the interpretation and choreographic presentations of Peter Badejo of Badejo Arts and 'H'. Patten of Koromanti Arts. Both of these choreographers are committed to the research and production of Traditional and Contemporary African dance forms and work nationally and internationally on major dance collaborations and productions. It will suggest that clarity and direction is critical to the continuance of the form in England but that those should be determined by the creators and genuine informed supporters of the work and not haemorrhaged by historical inaccuracies, unnecessary and irrelevant labelling processes and erratic funding policies.

The Conclusion will draw together the key strands of this thesis. It will highlight how the negative literature by British writers several centuries ago has impacted African dance development in the UK but how through the practice of traditional and Christian religious worship, the forms found expression in cities throughout the UK. It will show that today these forms are being decoded and re-presented in new and exciting ways for Western audiences. It will underscore the contributions being made by dancers and choreographers who research and use traditional African religious practice to inform their work.

Finally, there is awareness that this thesis is at the beginning of a new era in African dance research and development and that there will be several avenues to explore in the future, to increase understanding and appreciation of new and exciting forms of African dance in the UK.



It is often said that religious considerations dominate the ordering of daily life in African societies. This statement certainly holds true for Ghana. Ghanaians are generally religious and their shared religious beliefs constitute the fundamental basis of their sense of social identity, values and destiny.<sup>1</sup>

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Traditional African Societies and early Relationships with Europe**

#### **(1) Misunderstanding and Misinformation**

For several centuries European writers have largely misunderstood, over-simplified and erroneously reported on traditional cultural practices from the continent of Africa. The sentiments and stereotypical viewpoints from many of those early reports have subconsciously seeped into the thought processes of dance practitioners, students, potential students and others in contemporary British society and it seems feasible that a logical derivative from those unquestioned reports, could have adversely affected the development of African dance in England. Unquestionably, many young black people themselves<sup>2</sup> have imbibed some of the reported 'primitiveness' of the culture and those have been further negatively 'conditioned' by the portrayal of African cultural practices in the Western media. But traditional cultural practices, including dance, are very complex issues within African societies and the function of 'the dance' as part of an evolutionary process - social, political and artistic - has to be understood within that specific context.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kuada & Yao Chachah, *Ghana: Understanding the People and their Culture* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1999), p.36.

<sup>2</sup> In a survey commissioned by East Midlands Arts on African Peoples' Dance in the region (2002), I interviewed many young black people who described African dance as primitive. Most had never attended a workshop or a performance.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans in Africa had status and power bases and sent numerous “new and accurate observations”<sup>3</sup> back to Europe of the African’s way of life. They created a hierarchical order in which the perceived ‘other’, was promoted as people of low social and moral fibre. As Leonard E. Barrett noted in his Introduction, anyone writing against that particular common theme of the time would have been considered ‘a depraved person or a would-be conspirator’. As Europe elevated itself to the apex of control, its negative perceptions of Africans had a psychological effect on local communities and that psychological assault also later materialised in the diaspora in issues of identity. African dance in the West has suffered as a direct result of that damage.

## (2) Early African Civilisation and Cultural Traditions

At the Windhoek conference on *The African Origin of Civilisation and the Destiny of Africa*, Nahas A. Angula stated that

It is no exaggeration to state that African civilisation reached its highest point between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Within these centuries Africa developed its own culture, economic systems and political institutions.....Art and craft were of high quality. The technologies of mining, smelting and ironwork were widespread<sup>4</sup>.

Much of early British literature reporting on contact with Africa does not resonate with the same conviction as Angula does and this is principally because non-Africans initially wrote Africa’s history. In *Archaeological & Other Prehistoric Evidence of Traditional African Religious Expression*, Pierre de Maret noted that, “remains from the environment and material culture lend themselves better to the reconstruction of ecology, technology, and economy than to that of political, social, and religious structures”<sup>5</sup> yet archaeological finds throughout Africa are clearly highlighting the longevity and advanced state of development

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the reports written about the continent and its inhabitants began with this particular phrase. See for example James Houstoun and William Bossman later in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Nahas A. Angula, ‘The Emasculation of Africa 1500-1800: Pre-Colonial African Society’ in *The African Origin of Civilisation and the Destiny of Africa*, ed. by N. Angula and B.F. Bankie (Namibia: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers (PTY) Ltd, 2000), pp. 16-26 (p.16).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre de Maret, ‘Archaeological & Other Prehistoric Evidence of Traditional African Religious Expression’ in *Religion in Africa*, ed. by Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis L Thomson, (London: James Currey, 1994), pp. 182-195 (p.183).



of African civilisation and culture. Through re-appraisal of Rock Art, Sculpture, Burial rituals and Monuments, analyses point to structured organisational systems, self-governance and thriving cultural traditions, in ancient Africa. Various artefacts of the San people of Namibia and the Shona communities of Zimbabwe plus Nok sculptures from Central Nigeria and Shaba in eastern Zaire, confirm that throughout the continent, traditional cultures flourished. According to de Maret

Nigeria alone has yielded a wealth of data, especially in Yoruba country, where altars were generally built in the courtyard. Spectacular evidence of this comes from Ife, where some of the famous terracotta heads have been recovered in a very old courtyard. There are numerous other aspects of archaeological evidence found both in Benin and Ife that echo traditional Yoruba religious practices.<sup>6</sup>

Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers reporting on a punitive expedition into Benin in 1897 noted that

...the point of chief interest in connection with the subject of this paper was the discovery, mostly in the king's compound and the Juju houses, of numerous works of art in brass, bronze, and ivory, which, as before stated, were mentioned by the Dutchman, Van Nyendaeel, as having been constructed by the people of Benin in 1700.<sup>7</sup>

He added that

.....their real value consists in their representing a phase of art – and rather an advanced stage – of which there is no actual record, although no doubt we cannot be far wrong in attributing it to European influence, probably that of the Portuguese some time in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

As N. A. Angula has noted, by 1700 Africa was already highly developed in smelting and other creative areas and its people were thus competent and capable of creating works using advanced technology. Verney Lovett Cameron in, *Across Africa* (1873), reported on the highly skilled works of African craftsmen,

From beginning to pound the clay till the pot – holding about three gallons – was put aside to dry, occupied thirty-five minutes and providing it with a bottom might take ten minutes more.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.192.

<sup>7</sup> Augustus Pitt-Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), p. vi.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. vi.



The shapes are very graceful and wonderfully truly formed, many being like the amphora in Villa Diomed at Pompeii.<sup>9</sup>

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century West Africa had already celebrated periods of enormous prosperity in three great African Empires.<sup>10</sup> From the Kingdom of Ghana through to the wealthy Empire of Mali, there was brisk trading, increased scholarship, generation and accumulation of wealth and the production of arts and crafts. Cheik Anta Diop pointed out that

The first Nigerian civilization, which Bernard and William Fagg named the Nok civilization, has been traced back to the first millennium BC, the ceramics found there being radio-carbon dated over arrange from 900 BC to 200 AD.....we do know with certainty that in the eighth century AD the Empire of Ghana was already in existence, extending over all of West Africa, right to the Atlantic.<sup>11</sup>

Diop believes that the continent has contributed an enormous amount to world culture and quoted Professor Georges Gurvitch.

Black African culture set for the world an example of extraordinary vitality and vigor. All vitalist conceptions, religious as well as philosophic, I am convinced, came from that source. The civilization of ancient Egypt would not have been possible without the great example of Black African culture, and in all likelihood it was nothing but the sublimation thereof.<sup>12</sup>

As African culture flourished for centuries, so did its religious practices, the latter influencing a significant portion of daily life and providing structures of community organisation that sustained social cohesion. Religious practice was central to life and though there were no written codes, its *practiced values* exercised community control. Borders were ill defined and ethnic groups flourished, fought and enslaved each other but lived within ‘systems of beliefs’ that respected and interacted with the visible and invisible worlds and the environment. African civilisation emphasised and expressed the depth of emotional life and its spirituality.

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<sup>9</sup> Verney Lovett Cameron, *Across Africa* (London: Daldy, Isbister & Co, 1877), vol.1, p.290.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Daniel Chu & Elliot Skinner, *A Glorious Age in Africa: the Story of Three Great African Empires* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Cheik Anta Diop, *Black Africa The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1978), p.4.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.5.

### (3) Religious Practice in Traditional African Societies

For African communities, up to the present time, religious practice is critical to their existence. For Yorubas, E. Bolaji Idowu asserts, “the key note of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them”.<sup>13</sup> This belief system permeated the attitudes of black communities and was transmitted with slaves and free men from the continent of Africa to the New World. Religious practice guided the lives of its people and found expression in music and dance and in communal worship. Unequivocally, those practices guaranteed the survival of the dance forms in the West.

Though Africa is a vast continent with millions of people with variations of thoughts and practices, Kofi Asare Opoku<sup>14</sup> suggests that traditional religion ‘binds’ its people together. This ‘binding’ is through six key components that underpin their set of religious beliefs. These he outlined as, belief in God, (*Supreme Being*), belief in ancestral spirits, belief in supernatural entities of lesser deities, respect for the environment and animals and plants associated with good things, a relationship with other lesser spirits, (including those with powers of magic and sorcery) and concluded that charms and amulets are integral to religious practice. Interpretation and emphasis may vary according to different ethnic groups or the reason for a particular religious event, but generally, all Africans would recognise these elements in worship.

As the Africans had neither Bible nor other written text they transmitted information orally and the accent of survival was directly through *religious practice*; dance was a key method of communication. History has shown that wherever Africans, as slaves or free men

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<sup>13</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu quoted in *Religion*, (Nigeria: unpublished, undated article), p.37. Dr. Idowu is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan.

<sup>14</sup> Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), p. 9-10.

gathered, they planted Africa firmly in their environment through religious celebrations. As Kofi Asare Opoku noted

A close observation of Africa and its societies will reveal that religion is at the root of African culture and it is the determining principle of African life. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that in traditional Africa, religion is life and life, religion<sup>15</sup>.

This belief system operated on two specific levels. Firstly, Africans internalised their system of beliefs, honouring and respecting the *Supreme Being*, other deities and their ancestors within their own family context and secondly there was an externalised relationship between the individual and the wider community. In the latter, the two forces of beliefs combined and were given public approval through community events. As John Miller Chernoff noted, “for Africans, ideas of community serve as the foundation for conceptions of the order of the world and for evaluations of the meaning of life”.<sup>16</sup> It is through this dual relationship that African culture has survived in the West and maintained a link with the continent. Carlyle Fielding Stewart’s definition of African–American spirituality underscores that existence. In Africa there was no separation between the State and the Church as religion conditioned behaviour and behaviour was completely guided by religion. The *Supreme Being* and the *ancestors, the orishas, loas* and numerous other deities guided and protected communities and provided their vision for living whilst also nourishing and healing the body and the mind.

What though is so powerful about traditional African religion and how has it maintained its influence amongst people after so many centuries of religious persecution? Quite simply, to the African, religion is life. John S Mbiti shifted African religious understanding from the fringes to a central African platform as he highlighted the fact that

Religion is a difficult word to define, and it becomes even more difficult in the context of African traditional life. ....For him (the African) therefore, and for

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.1.

<sup>16</sup> John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.164.



the larger community of which he is a part, to live is to be caught up in a religious drama. This is fundamental, for it means that man lives in a religious universe. Both that world and practically all his activities in it, are seen and experienced through a religious understanding and meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Mbiti pointed out that the “Africans have their own ontology and to understand their religions we must penetrate that ontology”.<sup>18</sup> He dismissed widely held Western concepts of African religion as primitive and animistic, pointing out that it is a religion that is practiced by communities living in harmony with their environment. He added that

The invisible world is symbolized or manifested by these visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature. The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks of the other, and African peoples ‘see’ that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world. This is one of the most fundamental religious heritages of African peoples. It is unfortunate that foreign writers, through great ignorance, have failed to understand this deep religious insight of our peoples; and have often either ridiculed it, or naively presented it as ‘nature worship’ or ‘animism’. Traditional African societies have been neither deaf nor blind to the spiritual dimension of existence, which is so deep, so rich and so beautiful.<sup>19</sup>

Mbiti maintains that a system of beliefs coupled with practice, religious objects and places, values and morals and religious officials and leaders, aggregate to give meaning to traditional religious practice. A world with ancestors and spirits, with special places and objects, with priests with special powers, with rituals that bind communities together and one in which there was a strong relationship with the universe in a consistent and satisfying way.

Throughout the continent, African traditional religions share many common beliefs. In Zambia (Ndembu religion), V.W. Turner pointed out that there are four main components. He identified these as the belief in a High God (Nzambi) who created the world, a belief in ancestral spirits, a belief in an intrinsic efficacy of certain animal and vegetable substances as medicines and the belief that there are good and bad practices for personal gain in anti-social, destructive powers of female witches and male sorcerers (aloji). These are almost identical to those outlined by Kofi Asare Opoku and Mbiti, reinforcing the commonalities of religious practices across the continent and hence providing a greater degree of understanding and

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<sup>17</sup> John S Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1980), p.15.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.15.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p.57.

communication, when slaves from different communities met on foreign soil. Although undervalued for centuries, Kofi Asare Opoku points out that African religion has values of universality.

....., African Traditional Religion is part of the religious heritage of mankind. There are elements in it that are universal, but there are also some distinctive features of local origin which give it its discernible characteristics as African. Nevertheless, like all religions, African religion deals with the holy and springs from man's eternal quest to comprehend the universe and to come to terms with the forces that control his inner being. Religion in Africa,.....is a profound expression of the apprehension of a truth which is not of man's own making, a truth whose significance originates from the fact that its validity does not depend on the mind of man.<sup>20</sup>

Turner, commenting on African rituals, points out that these are segmented into 'phases' or 'stages' and into sub-units such as 'episode', 'actions', and 'gestures'.

.... we are dealing with information that is regarded as authoritative, even as ultimately valid, axiomatic.....we are concerned here with the crucial values of the believing community, whether it is a religious community, a nation, a tribe, a secret society, or any other type of group whose ultimate unity resides in its orientation towards transcendental and invisible powers. It is not only a question of values, but of the relationships between values – of an ideological 'structure', rather than a random assemblage.<sup>21</sup>

And added that

Ritual is a periodic restatement of the terms in which men of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of a coherent social life. There is clearly a far more 'practical' (in the sense of necessary and basic) goal than any type of specific practical activity. It has been more than once suggested that religious ritual is mainly 'expressive', that it portrays in symbolic form certain key values and cultural orientations. This is true as far as it goes, but it points to only one of many properties it possesses. More important is its creative function – it actually creates, or re-creates, the categories through which men perceive reality – the axioms underlying the structure of society and the laws of the natural and moral orders.<sup>22</sup>

For the African 'unity resides in its orientation towards transcendental and invisible powers' and given the complimentary systems of beliefs and associated 'rituals' throughout the continent, the re-creation of traditional practices in the New World required little or no external motivators. Traditional religious practice was crucially about *bonding communities*

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<sup>20</sup> op. cit. p.8.

<sup>21</sup> V.W. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1981), p.2-3.

<sup>22</sup> ibid. p.6-7.

together whereas for Europeans, Christianity was essentially concerned with converting ‘savages’ through saving the souls of *individuals*, hence its minimal impact.

In spite of its powerful role in community cohesion, traditional religion allows independent thoughts and actions and permits a questioning of God. It acknowledges that there are good and evil spirits and that some gods may be ‘bad’ and recognises that some adherents of the faith, use elements of traditional practice for ‘evil’ purposes. According to Kuada & Chachah, these two qualities are linked to each other.

The Ewe, for example, believes that *So* (thunder) is a sky God and functions as the Supreme Being’s executioner. God’s dissatisfaction with the Ewe is communicated to them through *So*. It uses lighting, excessive rainfall or drought as its medium of communication.

Due to their functions, these spirits are in continuous contact with human beings and exert immense influence on their daily life. Their overriding purpose is to help people to live in harmony with nature, the spiritual world in general, and with each other.<sup>23</sup>

As Europe expanded prior to, during and after the periods of international slavery, British interests on the continent continued, insofar as Africa provided numerous opportunities for economic and religious expansion. The British were equipped to *de-construct* Africa’s own traditional infrastructure, social networks and systems of governance and African societies had to be *re-constructed* in the image of the new power elite. The continent of Africa was thus presented as one devoid of systems of governance and with ‘barbaric’ cultural traditions, although as highlighted earlier through archaeological excavations, that was not the case. British writers impacted the world’s thinking and a distorted history of Africa emerged and was generally accepted by Western nations, and generations later, by many black communities universally.

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<sup>23</sup> op. cit. p.38.



Islam and Christianity were introduced on the continent to encourage local communities to alter their practices but African-practiced 'nature-based' religions held resolutely. John Henrik Clarke believed that "the role of religions in the domination and destruction of African civilizations was ruthless"<sup>24</sup> and concluded that both Islam and Christianity played major parts in that process. To the British, the traditional music and dancing and the effervescent manner in which Africans practiced their religions appeared to be no more than 'howling, 'skipping and 'terrible noises' and from that perspective, they failed to investigate the significance of those practices within African communities. For the communities, religious rituals, dance and music were functional and integrated within daily life and operated as powerful agents of communication between each other, their ancestors and their gods. In *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown suggested that in any community, religion, on one level, operated as a mechanism for social order.

We may entertain as at least a possibility the theory that any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery, as are morality and law, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. From this point of view we deal not with the origins but with the social functions of religions, i.e. the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order.<sup>25</sup>

In African traditional societies there were no written codes of conduct but the maintenance of morals and social order, introduced through the oral tradition and maintained through communal religious practice, governed the lives of the communities. Traditional religious practice operated as an instrument of overt social control and to that extent, afforded very little opportunities for foreign intervention.

These concepts and beliefs in traditional religious practices found expression in the Caribbean in a range of explicit ways; at celebrations for birth and death (child-naming ceremonies, Nine Nights and funerals), in thanksgiving for a good harvest (Crop-Over) and

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<sup>24</sup> John Henrik Clarke, *Christopher Columbus and the Afrikan Holocaust: Slavery and the Rise of European Capitalism* (Brooklyn, New York: A & B Publishers Group, 1998), p.22.

<sup>25</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Address* (London: Cohen and West Ltd, 1969), p.154.

in festivals (Mardi Gras and carnivals). Invariably there were practices that deviated from the 'good' and many believed that *obeah*<sup>26</sup> that the slaves used against their masters and others, was 'witchcraft' from Africa. The practice of *obeah* was banned throughout the Caribbean yet even today, it is still widely practiced.

(i) **Spirituality, Healing and the African's Attitude to Death**

Africans communicate with the invisible and visible worlds and respect, and give reverence to, objects that they have come to appreciate as having particular qualities to cure and complement the healing process. They utilise the medicinal value of certain plants and strive to maintain a balance between the physical and spiritual world. They see frail health as a rupture between the spiritual and physical worlds and Kuada & Chachah point out that

Despite the increasing development in medical facilities and general education, most Ghanaians still place their hope and trust in the curative powers of traditional healers. The reason can be found in the central position that spirits hold in the lives of many people. Most protracted illnesses are believed to have spiritual causes. It is only when the gods have withdrawn their blessings that people can fall victim to a serious illness. A complete cure is impossible until the underlying spiritual disturbance is removed.<sup>27</sup>

Kofi Asare Opoku noted that this belief is common throughout West Africa. He adds that

The idea that there must be complete harmony between the body and the spirit is basic to West African thought; for it is believed that either part, when damaged, will have effect on the other. In case of illness, for example, attention is not paid exclusively to the physiological aspects but to the spiritual causes as well, for good health and well being can only be attained when both body and spirit are taken care of.<sup>28</sup>

Maintaining those connections between the spiritual world and the physical world are not the sole prerogatives of religious leaders for these ideas are now also explored in theatrical presentations. The connections, including those celebrating 'death' find expression in contemporary African dance in the UK. Particularly during the periods of slavery, death was

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<sup>26</sup> Obeah, a religion originally practiced in Africa and found now in parts of the West Indies. It is believed that it involves witchcraft.

<sup>27</sup> op. cit. p.46.

<sup>28</sup> op. cit. p.91.

a common phenomenon and Europeans were perplexed at the 'elaborate' manner in which slaves 'celebrated' death within their community. For Africans death was an opportunity for communities to renew their faith, revitalise themselves in public and re-connect with the *Supreme Being* and ancestors. The departed was provided with various amounts of food for the journey into the after-life and was ushered into that new life with songs and dances.

Throughout Africa today, these customs and practices are still observed. Death is celebrated; reverence is accorded to ancestors and the spirits for their protection and guidance. At funerals they mourn and dance and as J.H Kwabena Nketia pointed out

The performance of music and dancing at traditional marriage ceremonies, however, is not as widespread or as intense as what one may observe at funerals where special ceremonial dirges; funeral songs and dances may be performed<sup>29</sup> and

The funeral is thus an important focus for the performing arts- for music, dance and drama.<sup>30</sup>

Death brings people together to strengthen links between the living and the ancestors but also serves a range of other purposes, as Paul John Isaak observes in Namibia.

Indeed, such funeral rites among Africans stand out as major community gatherings. One important reason for this, as I came to understand, is that ancestors play a large part in the lives of the living: the importance of funerals and memorials relates directly to the importance of ancestors in African life and death.

Furthermore, the significance of such events lies not only in this fundamental relationship to ancestors, however, but also on the funeral's bearing on relation among the living. The many events of the funeral provide occasions for family reunions, therapeutic expression and the healing of strained relationships. They even provide an opportunity for courtship for the young, historical commentary and the transmission and creation of knowledge, as well as performances of verbal and gestural art such as drama, music and dance.<sup>31</sup>

Funerals provided a range of opportunities for communities to rejuvenate themselves whilst paying their respects for the departed. This community 'celebration' is demonstrated in

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<sup>29</sup> J.H.Kwabena Nketia, *Ghana – Music, Dance and Drama: A review of the Performing Arts of Ghana* (Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1965), p.2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>31</sup> Paul John Isaak, *Religion and Society: A Namibian Perspective* (Namibia: Out of Africa Publishers, 1997), p.90.



*Boloba – A Funeral Dance* in the former Belgian Congo. See illustration overleaf. Through funerals and other religious events, the art of dance, and everyday rituals and symbolisms associated with death, flourished, and later found expression in the theatre. Dance communication is observed and displayed formally and informally and, for example,

The so-called trance dances, usually follow after the priests have acted as prophetic media and soothed their adherents. African religious dances have all the ingredients associated with legitimate theatre: they have contrasts of strong and light dynamics, conflicts, tension and release. They portray movements of great solemnity, lyricism and light-heartedness.<sup>32</sup>

## (ii) Ancestral Spirits

Africans accord ancestral spirits enormous amounts of power and they believe that the departed would act as an intermediary in their deliberations with the *Supreme Being* and other ancestors and thus provide guidelines for better living to those on earth. Yorubas believe that

It is the ancestors who have interpreted and revealed the words of the universal construct. They have actualised the *ashe* in regards to psychological and cultural expression. They have uncovered the inherent divinity and spirituality of human existence. The ancestors provide the ethics and world views of the tradition<sup>33</sup>.

This connection between the physical and spiritual worlds is prominent in everyday interactions and as Mineke Schipper observed

Ancestors are worshipped as demi-gods and those who were tribal chiefs still have great power after death. They are consulted when important decisions are to be made, in judgements or at traditional ceremonies. It is necessary to respect them or they could punish the living by causing illnesses or accidents.<sup>34</sup>

and he continued, “the bonds between the living and the dead cannot be broken... However it may be, the dead continue to live among the living”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> A.M. Opoku and Willis Bell, *African dances: A Ghanaian Profile* (University of Ghana, Legon: Institute of African Studies, 1965), p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Baba Ifa Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* (Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1994), p.74.

<sup>34</sup> Mineke Schipper, *Theatre and Society in Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press (Pty) Ltd., 1982), p.21.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p.24.





'Boloba' - A Funeral Dance, Belgian Congo.  
Photo: Rev. G. Grenfell ©The Royal Geographical Society



In his poem *Sarzan*, the Senegalese poet Birago Diop wrote about the different ways in which the ancestors manifest themselves

Listen more often  
To Things than to Beings  
The Voice of the Fire is to be heard,  
Hear the Voice of the Water.  
Listen in the Wind  
The Bushes are sobbing:  
It's the breath of the ancestors.

Those who are dead have never left:  
They're in the Shade that illuminates  
And in the shade that becomes thick.  
The Dead aren't under the Earth:  
They're in the quivering Tree,  
They're in the groaning Wood,  
They're in the running Water,  
They're in the standing Water,  
They're in the Hut, they're in the Crowd.<sup>36</sup>

As will be explored in later chapters, rituals pertaining to death, funerals and communication with ancestors are frequent themes in theatrical performances.

#### (4) Dance in Traditional African Societies

According to William Ofutsu Adinku<sup>37</sup> dance in Africa falls into three broad categories. He describes these as *ceremonial, religious and social* dancing, pointing out that often the divisions between them are blurred in that a particular ceremonial dance could equally be performed as part of a religious event. Nevertheless he indicated that these broad categories adequately reflect the range of dances to be found in Ghana. He cited the *Fontomfrom* and *Kete* dances as ceremonial forms, *Akom* and *Sohu* as religious dances and the *Gahu* and *Kpanlogo* were classed as social forms. Each of these dances specifically recalls and relays distinct messages to their communities and provides historical and community links and communities know how to react and behave according to the dance they are witnessing (generally through costumes, movement, occasion, music patterns etc).

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<sup>36</sup> Birago Diop, 'Sarzan' in *Theatre and Society in Africa*, op. cit. p.24-25.

<sup>37</sup> William Ofutsu Adinku, University of Ghana, op. cit.



Whereas in traditional practice there is immediate understanding between ‘the performance’ and the ‘audience’, this process of education amongst audiences for African dance in the UK is under-developed and requires urgent attention if a greater understanding of African dance is to be achieved. For the majority of Western audiences, traditional display dancing has encouraged them to expect ‘exotic’, high-energy’ and entertaining displays and thus there is disappointment when their expectations are not matched by choreographers presenting contemporary work that requires a greater deal of intellectual rigour and understanding. But even within display dancing, there are basic interpretations that require an informed audience. In *African Dances*, A.M. Opoku and Willis Bell present a range of traditional dances that highlight the quality, aesthetics and meanings of the forms. In the *Lobi Sebire*, a ‘work dance’, men and women work together and their movements reflect strong actions in the upper body as dancers circle the stage. Simple costuming allows for free movements depicting work, and the rippling torso movements and the strength in arm movements- ‘convey’ a wide range of human emotions through the ‘working experience’. Men wear short wraps around their waist and the women are ‘wrapped’, exposing their arms/necks and feet. The human body is the vehicle of communication for the dancer. According to Opoku and Bell,

Music while you work is common practice in our communal life. Musical stimulus makes the most arduous tasks light and enjoyable. Dynamism, dignity and controlled inner strength are characteristic of this sequence from the Sebire dance. The so-called ‘convulsive movement’ is meant to show restrained power and strength to frighten an enemy.<sup>38</sup>

Nissio Fiagbedzi continues in a similar vein in discussing music, dance and drama amongst the Ewe communities in Southeast Ghana, referring to the ranges of dance in the Ewe communities and also to their functionality and context in past and current usage. He categorises traditional dances as *war dances, ritual dances and social dances*, the latter two

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<sup>38</sup> A.M. Opoku and Willis Bell, *African dances: A Ghanaian Profile* (University of Ghana, Legon: Institute of African Studies, 1965), p.33.

forms falling within the classification suggested by Adinku whereas a war dance could be classed as a ceremonial or a religious dance. In the case of *Agbekor* for example, a war dance with its roots amongst the Anlo Ewe communities, Fiagbedzi noted that “...dancers line up in rows several lines deep facing the musicians with enough space in front, behind and on the sides that enables them to depict military strategies and manoeuvres in movement”.<sup>39</sup> He illustrated how battle formations of the past are re-enacted within communities and explored how the dynamic relationship between music and dance evolved to suit a particular event. Through participation and practice in these forms, young Ghanaians learn about their history. Dances from all of these categories (*Sohu, Gahu, Kpanlogo, Kete, Agbekor* etc) were directly introduced into Britain in the early seventies by Ghanaian tutors and, combining with other dance forms from the Caribbean, laid the basis for traditional dance displays in the UK. War and religious dances from the west coast of Africa would have been practiced in the Caribbean itself, given the use of the drums in the number of revolts and the frequency of death amongst the slave communities. Whether social, ceremonial or religious, slaves danced throughout the Caribbean, thus maintaining the continuity of ritualised dance practice from the continent.

J. H. Kwabena Nketia provides a sensitive insight into the communicative aspects of African dance forms. He understands the significance of this highly developed practice and its positioning as an effective method of community communication.

The dance can also be used as a social and artistic medium of communication. It can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions. Through the dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility or cooperation and friendship held by others towards them. They can offer respect to their superiors, or appreciation and gratitude to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence of rivals, affirm their status to servants, subjects, and others, or express their beliefs through the choice of appropriate dance vocabulary or symbolic gestures.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nissio Fiagbedzi, ‘Music, Dance and Drama’ in *A Handbook of Eweland Volume 1: The Ewes of Southeastern Ghana* ed. by Francis Agbodeka (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1997, pp. 153-176 (p.163).

<sup>40</sup> J.H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1986), p.207-208.

In *Creation and Presentation of Traditional African dances*, F. Nii Yartey continued with this particular theme of communications as he discussed the 'use of symbolic gestures' in African dance. He outlined how communities were able to communicate with each other during a performance and illustrated some of the common gestures used in Ghanaian dances.

If one wants to make sure whether a beautiful female he admires is married or not, he forms a closed-ring with the thumb and the middle finger. If she is not married, she replies with the same gesture but with an opening of the 'ring'. She closes the ring if she is married.

Finally, if the dancer wants to ask or beg a favour he hits the back of the right hand against the palm of the left hand, fast or slow, depending on the urgency of the situation.<sup>41</sup>

Nii Yartey provides numerous examples of this coded form of communication among communities, but as European observers were unable to decode the forms, the dances were often dismissed as irrelevant and inferior. Through 'drum language', during periods of hostility between different local ethnic groups or from foreign aggressors, communities effectively communicated with each other.

As African religious, social and cultural events are activities purposely designed to involve the whole community, they become the 'theatre of experience'. As Mineke Schipper observed about theatre in African Society,

The performance, the presentation, is a total event in which all those present take part, whether by narrating or making music, by clapping in rhythm or by dancing or singing refrains. Throughout the performance there are favourable or unfavourable reactions, the spectators functioning as immediate critics. Everyone is closely involved in the performance.<sup>42</sup>

The community becomes, as Mineke Schipper pointed out, 'involved in the performance', but not only through producing appropriate reactions, but more importantly through dynamically serving as an extension of 'the stage activities' by contributing to what one is

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<sup>41</sup> F. Nii Yartey, 'Creation and Presentation of Traditional African dances', *Africa Quarterly*, vol.29 no.1-2 (1989), 57-64 (p.63).

<sup>42</sup> op. cit. p.11-12.



witnessing. This interaction is only possible if the relationship between the performers/presenters and the community/the audience are linked through a common understanding with both groups knowing intuitively how and when to respond to each other. In his work on the *Travelling Theatre in Nigeria*, 'Biodun Jeyifo makes the point about this connectivity by stating that "hours before the curtain raises or the lights come up on a production by a Travelling Theatre troupe, the performance would, in a sense, have already begun".<sup>43</sup> He explained that this starting point would have begun through community awareness through the promotional channels for the production (radio, television, flyers and mobile "mummy-wagons"<sup>44</sup>) and then, "in general, however, the performance begins when the audience indicates, first tactfully, then quite volubly and restively, that it can no longer wait. The cardinal rule in this theatre tradition is that ultimately the company must defer to the wishes of the audience".<sup>45</sup> This is common practice in African performances, indicating quite clearly that the audience is a direct part of the performance procedure and integral to the success of the performance. This occurrence is not a feature of dance in the West.

Any unravelling of the misinformation transmitted by Europeans has to be seen within this context- the totality of the form and the significance and meaning it has for its communities.

As A.M. Jones and L. Kombe pointed out

Let us note here, however, the juxtaposition of drumming, clapping, singing, and dancing. These are not four departments of artistic expression. They form one indivisible whole: it is most important to grasp that the highest expression of the musical and rhythmic arts is, for the African, the 'Symphony of the Dance'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Lagos: Dept. of Culture, Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports & Culture, 1984), p.9.

<sup>44</sup> 'Mummy Wagons' refer to the highly decorative, independently owned, public transport vehicles that assist in the distribution and displaying of material to do with specific theatrical events. It is believed that the term has been borrowed from Ghana.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p.9.

<sup>46</sup> A.M.Jones and L. Kombe, *The Icila Dance Old Style: A study in African Music and Dance of the Lala Tribe of Northern Rhodesia*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1952), p.2.

These writers were decoding what they were witnessing and interpreted their observations within a context that had meaning and significance for the community in which it was being performed. They noted

For the African, dance is by no means an unsophisticated rough and tumble. It is a highly developed art form, and when the more skilled performers in the district are roped in, it has a technical musical excellence and an aesthetic driving 'verve' which cannot but be recognised by anyone with music in his soul, ...It is indeed a living art, and that these are no idle words of sentimental exaggeration...<sup>47</sup>

### (i) Masks in Traditional Dance Practice

According to Klaus E. Muller and Ute Ritz-Muller,

The word "mask" can be traced back to the Arabic term *maskara*, meaning both mockery and clownery, as well as describing the person who performed such clownery. The universal, and probably the original, significance of masks, whether they cover the face, head, or entire body, is that they give concrete form to the powers of the world beyond, as is generally suggested by the names that they are given.<sup>48</sup>

In many African dances, performers used masks and costumes to maintain the relationship between communities and the ancestral spirits and other deities. Masked dancers became 'the voice' of the ancestors and no one is allowed to 'unmask' them in public. Traditionally, they were sent to 'reprimand' individuals of the community who had deviated from 'norms', though that role is much changed now.

As Franco Monti noted

It would be no exaggeration to say that in African sculpture enduring and universal emotions are realised to the maximum and achieve an ideal expression in this art form. The mask, then, does not depict a single emotion at a specific time; it is not the portrait of a man who fears, who fights, or who dies, but it is Fear, War, Death. The particular has been seen, understood and overcome; it has faded away and been replaced by the universal which is always valid for man of every era, whatever his circumstances may be.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* p.2.

<sup>48</sup> Klaus E. Muller and Ute Ritz-Muller, *Soul of Africa: Magical Rites and Traditions* (Cologne: Konemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000), p.366.

<sup>49</sup> Franco Monti, *African Masks* (Middlesex: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1969), p.9.



Masks in themselves convey deep and specific meanings within particular religious events and as Carol Finley stated,

The purpose of the mask is not only to conceal the identity of the wearer. The mask actually creates a new identity-one from the spirit world. Many Africans use masks in private initiations, in the rituals of secret societies, and in coming-of-age ceremonies.<sup>50</sup>

The varieties and complexities of masks are many and though they appear everywhere on the continent, they are not used throughout all African societies. Nevertheless, there is a commonality of purpose within the societies who use them. Robert Bleakley indicated that

The main purpose behind the carving of masks is the desire to give a real and tangible form to the spirit world, as a means of gaining some control over the universal creative force. This force is seen as present in every living thing and capable of being used in a positive and protective manner. The accruing of credit in the spiritual world is considered a real and necessary aspect of life.<sup>51</sup>

In *Masks of black Africa*, Ladislav Segy points out that, “the masked dancer himself, mimicking his role, often chanted the purpose of the dance. The dancer needed exceptional physical strength and special skill. Because the dance was technically exacting, he had to undergo arduous training”.<sup>52</sup> Segy presented a context and a much more informed view of what he witnessed and continued by highlighting the fact that,

To emphasize further the nonhuman nature of the spirit, the dancer often wore a voluminous, vividly colored costume made of raffia, leaves, corn stalks, and cloth with shells and other amulets attached to it. .... The Ibo, Dogon, and Batshioko attached artificial breasts to it. The costume covering the whole body so that no part was visible<sup>53</sup>

Wearing costumes with attachments was symbolic and functional and it located the dance within a particular social context, enabling the community to respond in accordance to the particular occasion. Masks today appear frequently in theatrical dance in the UK and in

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<sup>50</sup> Carol Finley, *The Art of African Masks: Exploring Cultural Traditions* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1999), p.13.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Bleakley, *African Masks* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1978). Introduction. The masks in this book are identified by numbers and there are no page numbers in the entire book.

<sup>52</sup> Ladislav Segy, *Masks of black Africa* (New York, USA and London: Dover Publications Inc., and Constable, 1976), p.11.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p.11.



exploring spirituality and the continuity of African dance through two choreographers in London (see chapter five), it is noticeable that both use masks and traditional costumes in their choreography. In Patten's case, the mask dancer, the voice, appears in the first two dances of his production *Ina De Wildanis* and Badejo created *Living Circle*, by using the rituals derived from the Egungun festival. "Egun means "bone," "skeleton," or the spirit of a dead person who has returned to earth"<sup>54</sup> and is recognisable by particular masks.

## (5) African Resistance to European Control

Many African communities were not totally enamoured of the presence of foreigners within their communities and though ill-equipped, fiercely resisted to protect and maintain their traditions and way of life. According to Mackenzie,

In the course of the seventeenth century they (the Portuguese) were subjected to constant revolts, and in the 1690s all their positions in the interior of south-central Africa were destroyed..... This helps us to understand why Europeans failed to penetrate Africa as successfully as they penetrated the Americas and Asia in this period. Africans successfully resisted them.<sup>55</sup>

The Africans gained significant victories as Mackenzie illustrated

There were important states in east and central Africa also, and a black military revolution in southern Africa in the early nineteenth century that provided some African peoples with fresh powers of resistance there too. Europeans continued to be defeated by Africans, for example the Ashanti, the Zulu and the Abyssinians, until the late nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

The Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 increased opportunities for more European activity on the continent, and the scramble for Africa unveiled a second phase of European expansion on the continent. The Europeans agreed that "in the best interests of Africa and the world as a whole, traders and missionaries and other agents of all countries should have free access to the interior of Africa..."<sup>57</sup> Devoid of an African presence at the conference, and without any

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<sup>54</sup> op. cit. p.360.

<sup>55</sup> John. M. Mackenzie, *The Partition of Africa 1880 – 1900 and European imperialism in the nineteenth century* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983), p.3-4.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p.4.

<sup>57</sup> J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.164.

reference or consultation with African nations, the Europeans were confident that they were putting forward an acceptable worldview and marched into Africa, displacing its people yet again. As slavery was almost completely abolished in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the thrust of European exploitation shifted to using Africans to develop the natural resources within the continent itself. The entire continent was criss-crossed by foreign powers wielding enormous amounts of power and dictating the development of the local infrastructure. Communities were displaced, ethnic languages and traditional practices were once again marginalized and devalued. The continent was now re-defined to satisfy the economic needs of different European cities and for example, Namibia <sup>58</sup> was divided into two separate countries, scattering and splitting communities. German, Italian, French and English languages seemed commonplace. As the Africans were not signatories to the Berlin conference, they did not understand the precise nature of the Europeans' agreement and were hard pushed to see either the benefits of a Christian religion or economic empowerment or improvement in their countries. They continued to oppose European domination and relied, as they were accustomed to, on their traditional religious practices, using coded 'drum languages' to encourage and engage local communities to resist.

Although European nations were controlling Africa through various political systems, the cultural landscape was marginally affected. The Islamic faith<sup>59</sup> had some success but Christianity, during that period had little impact on the continent.<sup>60</sup> Traditional African religious practice accommodated some external influences and continued.

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<sup>58</sup> *The Power Stone: A history of the Kwanyama Kingdom*, Namibia. A video documentary analysing the impact of the Berlin decision on the people of Namibia. It focuses on traditional African belief systems within a particular ethnic group and illustrates how these survived throughout all the political, religious and social intervention by Europeans. Produced by Mamokobo Video & Research. Funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland. VHS 1999.

<sup>59</sup> See Daniel Chu & Elliot Skinner, *A Glorious Age in Africa, the Story of Three Great African Empires* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black. American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Jordan suggests that the English were not as keen as the Portuguese Catholics in converting the 'heathen' Africans. Accordingly, they only really began their 'crusade' in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Portuguese had started about the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



The accumulated affect of external dominance left Africa in chaos and under-developed<sup>61</sup> and today, the effects of that period of de-stabilisation remain and many European-created nation states on the continent are engulfed by wars and internal conflicts.

(6) Creating the Myth:

(i) European Perceptions of Traditional Religious Practices

European nations conspired to destroy the key element of African unity, religious practice, for in so doing they would have increased their access throughout the continent. Christianity was used strategically to support their intervention or as Peter B. Clarke expressed more succinctly, “the Great Object was to implant Christianity and ‘civilisation’”.<sup>62</sup> At the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century William Bossman recorded that “the Negroes are all without exception, crafty, villainous and fraudulent, and very seldom to be trusted; being sure to slip no opportunity of cheating a European, nor indeed one another”.<sup>63</sup> James Houstoun, a British medical doctor, in his *Some new and accurate observations....* reported that “this country produces nothing fit for Exportation but slaves, from whence there are incredible Numbers carried off yearly”.<sup>64</sup> In his view, the ignorant Negroes were legitimate cargo for exportation and

*As for their Customs, they exactly resemble their Fellow Creatures and Natives, the Monkeys; And as for their Religion, they only take their own unciviliz’d Method of becoming a Bubble to the different Fancies of the Bubblers; from worshipping Rocks, other snakes, spiders....*<sup>65</sup> [My italics]

Africans, as indicated earlier, paid respects to their departed ones in both simple and more elaborate ways and in 1678 Jean Barbot wrote that

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<sup>61</sup> See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1983).  
<sup>62</sup> Peter B. Clarke, *A Study of Religious Development from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1986), p.42. Although this statement was made in respect of Ghana, it rings true for the zealous Europeans in Africa and the West Indies.

<sup>63</sup> William Bossman, *A New and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory coasts* (London: James Knapton, 1705), p.117.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p.27.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p.33-34.



They weep and lament over the dead as soon as expired, in such manner, that *it is hideous and frightful to pass by the huts* where any black lies dead, by reason of the horrid shrieks and howling of the neighbours and relations, who resort to the house of the departed to bewail him.<sup>66</sup> [My italics]

Barbot was unaccustomed to this form of public grieving but within a European hierarchy that placed African cultural practice at the lowest possible level, this was presented as hideous howling. Henry Barth offered a more muted and understandable account on witnessing a similar event. He recalled

I sat a long time outside.....enjoying the sound of music and dancing which came from the opposite quartet of the village; .....it was not an ordinary amusement, but a religious dance to celebrate the death of an old man: for if a person in old age dies, his death is deemed a cause of satisfaction and mirth, while that of a young one is lamented with tears.<sup>67</sup>

The wake keeping to him 'was not ordinary amusement' but one of reverence and respect. He commented that there was a deeper sense of lamenting when the younger members of the communities died, if only because the elders normally looked to those to provide for the community later on. Barth showed a greater insight than most European travellers into this aspect of African culture and noted that "the same sort of worship as paid by these pagans to their ancestors prevails in a great part of Africa, and however greatly the peculiar customs attached to the mode of worship may vary, the principle is the same";<sup>68</sup>

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anna Hinderer, the wife of a church Minister, arrived in Yoruba country and wrote to a friend in England that

The gradual suppression of the slave trade opened the way, in 1843, for the preaching of the gospel to the inhabitants of this country, whose religion is a system of idolatry, in which a multitude of orishas, or idols, above all, Ifa, the god of divinations, who is

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<sup>66</sup> Jean Barbot, 'A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea; and of Ethiopia Inferior, vulgarly Angola: Being a new and accurate account of the western Maritime Countries of Africa...Containing a geographical, political and natural history of the kingdoms.. with a full account of all the European settlements.. and a new relation of the province of Guiana, and of the great rivers of Amazons and Oronoque in South America. With an Appendix; being a general account of the first discoveries of America' in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol.5 (London: Awnsham and J. Churchill, 1732), p.51.

<sup>67</sup> Henry Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa: Being a journal of an expedition 1849 – 1855* (London: Longmans and Roberts, 1857), vol.2 p.535.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* vol.3 p.191.

represented and consulted by means of palm-nuts, are worshipped as mediators between the people and the one Supreme God whom they acknowledge.<sup>69</sup>

Although there was some understanding of the Yoruba system, the mission was to eradicate it and replace it with Christianity. Verney Lovett Cameron in East Africa in 1877 echoed similar views to Hinderer. “Their religion is principally a mixture of fetish and idolatry. All villages have devil-huts and idols before which offerings of *pombe*, grain and meat are placed, and nearly every man wears a small figure round his neck or arm”.<sup>70</sup>

British reports undermined the basic infrastructure of the African’s way of life but as will be explored in the following chapters, although the cumulative effect of the negative reporting has had a profound effect on the development of African dance in the New World, the practices survived, re-emerged and are still being re-presented. Towards the end of the nineteenth century A.B. Ellis wrote that

With most races which are still relatively low in the scale of civilisation, it is found that their religion...is frequently the main-spring of their actions. Religion is not with them, as with civilised peoples, a matter outside one’s daily life; it is a subject which affects and influences in some degree almost every action of their daily life, and which is closely interwoven with all their habits, customs and modes of thought.<sup>71</sup>

Ellis crystallised the differences between the two cultures, for where Europeans ‘saw’ religion as being ‘outside’ their daily life to the African it impacted ‘almost every action of their daily life’. He was dismissing the deep and spiritual meaning of religion in the life of Africans yet in reality it was the cornerstone of their identity, the strength empowering millions of Africans to survive the Middle Passage and create a new life in the New World.

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<sup>69</sup> *Memorials of Anna Hinderer: Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1872), p.19-20.

<sup>70</sup> Verney Lovett Cameron, *Across Africa* (London: Daldy, Isbister and Co., 1877), vol.2 p.71. *Pombe* is a drink made from maize.

<sup>71</sup> A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language etc* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1887), p.9.

## (ii) European attitude to African Dance Practices

As far as African dancing was concerned, Europeans tended to view its practice with disdain. Georgiana Gore indicated that there was “positive appreciation for West African dance”<sup>72</sup> but noted that “in the nineteenth century...certain descriptions of the dances adopt the moral, prudish and prejudiced tone of the era, which represents them as non-aesthetic, sexually lewd and animalistic practices”.<sup>73</sup> She added that early European writers focussed on the ‘social organization’ and ‘cultural practice’ of communities rather than on dance ‘meanings’ (or details about costumes, performers, overall structure etc which anthropologists did later) but even so, many early writers had already introduced elements of racial inferiority that located the ‘other’, their religious practice and dance in the lowest rung of human civilisation.

There was however a significant difference in the reporting of dance. In terms of religious practice, Europeans felt that they could use their power, their God, their churches and their missionaries to convert Africans to Christianity. In terms of dance, they had no specific method to prevent communities from dancing. Traditional African dance triggered a new route of despair, for in this method of communication, foreigners found that the use of *their bodies* was ‘in the rudest possible manner’. Africans were introduced to community dancing from birth and were without inhibitions and were not afraid of publicly displaying and sharing emotions. For Africans, mostly poor and living in hot climates, exposing semi-naked or naked bodies in public was quite a natural occurrence for both men and women; for Europeans, that was sacrilege. As Europe’s preferred method of communication was the text and the spoken language, the oral tradition and the language of the drum and ‘the body’, satisfied Africans. To the casual observer, dance in African society signified nothing short of vulgarity but to its communities, it served a very diverse range of purposes. As these were not understood, African dance was often described in a derogatory manner. More

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<sup>72</sup> Georgiana Gore, op.cit. p.64.

<sup>73</sup> ibid. p.65.



importantly, dance remained *the prerogative of the African and could not be controlled* by foreign forces. As will be explored in chapter three, what was in Africa, *dance as resistance*, evolved into *ghetto dance with attitude* in the UK.

Europeans asserted themselves on the continent and produced numerous reports that reduced African dance practice to being ‘debauched and lecherous’. For Africans they fulfilled numerous roles and were sexually suggestive, graceful, dynamic, aggressive, and seductive. Europeans were unable to control the African’s ‘soul force’, his inner emotions and complex set of beliefs and thus dance, religious, ceremonial and social, continued. Michael Angelo in his travels in the Congo reported that “... the men go abroad a walking, to take their diversion, to converse together, and play upon certain instruments, which are wretched and ridiculous enough, till night, being altogether strangers to melancholy”.<sup>74</sup> Although he does not directly refer to dance customs, it is known that in the evening communities would gather together to play music and dance and thus “till night, being altogether strangers to melancholy” would certainly indicate that they were dancing to the music. He wrote that their dances were full of “shouting” and although he did describe certain instruments as wretched and ridiculous, he also noted that some of them “...which in some manner resembles the sound of an organ, and makes a pretty agreeable harmony, especially when three or four of them play together”.<sup>75</sup> By comparison William Bossman wrote that, “their musical instruments are various, and very numerous, but all of them yield a horrid and barbarous shocking sound”.<sup>76</sup> In Guinea, John Atkins observed that African dance was generally presented in the “round”. To the African the circle represents continuity of life and involves the performers presenting their work in the round with musicians and the audiences completing the ‘life cycle’. He mentioned that

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Angelo and Denis de Carli, ‘A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to the Congo, in the Years 1666, and 1667’ in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol.1 (London: Awnsham and J. Churchill, 1732), pp. 611-651(p.622).

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* p.622.

<sup>76</sup> *op. cit.* p.138.

Dancing is the diversion of their evenings: men and women make a ring in an open part of the town, and one at a time shows his skill in antic motions and gesticulations, yet with a great deal of agility, the company making the music by clapping their hands together during the time, helped by the louder noise of two or three drums made of a hollowed piece of tree, and covered with kid-skin. Sometimes they are all round in a circle laughing, and with uncouth notes, blame or praise somebody in the company.<sup>77</sup>

Although Atkins may not have understood all what he was observing, he was aware of the skills involved, of the relationship between the music and the dance and of the communicative relationship between performers and the wider community. From South Africa, John Campbell wrote that

They danced in a kind of measured regularity, striking the ground most violently with their feet. Many of them had small shields in their hands, which they moved dexterously, as if warding off arrows shot against them. Their eyes were fixed to the ground, retaining the greatest gravity of countenance.<sup>78</sup>

Campbell appeared to be reporting on a war dance that, as noted earlier, reflected the military approach adopted against enemies. Within this form, the relationship between the drummers and the warriors are exact and precise for directions and instructions are communicated through the coded drum patterns.

During the nineteenth century, the reporting of dance was not much improved, albeit with some observers offering their interpretations in more conciliatory terms. Richard Burton provided his views of dancing in Dahomey.

It is a tremendous display of agility, Terpsichore becoming more terrible than Mars....The arms are held in the position preferred by the professional runner, the hands paddle like a swimming dog's paw, the feet shuffle or stamp as if treading water, the elbows are jerked so as nearly to meet behind the back with a wonderful "jeu des omoplates", and the trunk joins in the play, the posteriors moving forwards and backwards to the pedal beat time....Here there is a general agitation of the frame, jerked in extreme movement to front and rear. As all these several actions, varied by wonderful shakings, joltings, grimaces, and contortions, must be performed rapidly, simultaneously, and in perfect measure to the music, it is not only violent, it is also a

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<sup>77</sup> op. cit. p.53.

<sup>78</sup> John Campbell, *Journal of Travels in South Africa; among the Hottentot and other Tribes; in the years 1812, 1813, and 1814.* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1834), p.122-123.



very difficult performance, exceeding even the Hindoo Nautch or the Egyptian feats.<sup>79</sup>

A convoluted description by Burton still highlighted the skill and agility required to perform and he also noted that, “even the small boys sprang into the arena, displaying admirable activity, and stamping with the grace and vigour of young bears”.<sup>80</sup> In East Africa Verney Cameron provided a general background to the African’s way of life and the community’s celebratory events. He wrote

Shortly before sunset they returned, and in the evening there was dancing, smoking, and singing, and drinking too when corn for making pombe is plentiful.

Drums are brought out and beaten vigorously by the hands, while men go circling round and round for hours at a time yelling and shouting.

The women never mingle with the men on these occasions, but sometimes engage in a dance by themselves, *when the gestures and actions are often even more immoral and indecent than those of the men*, though they are bad enough in all conscience.

Neither men nor women have any objection to be gazed on by the opposite sex whilst going through these antics, but as in most other tribes they never mix or dance together.<sup>81</sup> [My italics]

Throughout his journey he commented on the dance of the African continent in a style that reinforced the case for the African to be placed quite low in the order of civilisation.

Parties of Kasongo’s wives frequently came to see us, and as they had usually been imbibing freely, their manners and conversation were the reverse of moral and instructive. Sometimes *they would dance, and their looseness of gesture and extraordinary throwing about of their limbs* certainly exceeded anything I had ever seen.<sup>82</sup> [My italics]

It was not uncommon practice for Europeans to find the public presentations of African ‘sexuality’ in their dances as a ‘moral’ problem. Europeans, with Christian backgrounds, had a particularly rigid outlook about exposing the human body in public and, more pointedly, about women, ‘the fairer sex’, either revealing much of the human body or dancing in any

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<sup>79</sup> Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome with notices of the so called “Amazons”, the grand customs, the yearly customs, the human sacrifices, the present state of the slave trade and the Negroes place in Nature* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1864), p.47-48.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p.51.

<sup>81</sup> Verney Cameron, *op. cit.* p.190-191.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* p.91.



manner but genteel. Europeans therefore found the exuberance and lack of inhibition by the women dancers especially offensive. In *Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance*, P. Sterling Stuckey indicated that “a repulsive yet desirable object to many whites, the black body posed problems of a psychological nature for them”<sup>83</sup> and in his work on *Slave Culture*, he amplified the point thus

And it is possible that the recoil of whites from sacred dances stemmed from having considered it, in some measure, profane, especially when pelvic movement was involved. Such an attitude was opposed to that of the African, who had little conception of sexual activity, in and of itself, as dirty.

To Africans sexual intercourse is creative and holy. In songs/dance/movement it is not vulgar in their eyes (puberty of young girls, showing off womanhood to potential partners). Of course, sacred dance in Christianity was banned already, hence even more opposition to the African.<sup>84</sup>

European ‘cultural’ writings on Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century altered little but by then there was a growing voice from social anthropologists, ethnographers and others commenting on African dance, explicitly within a framework that analysed context and differentiated between ‘meanings’ and ‘functions’. But it was the casual observers’ negative comments that were appearing with regularity and impacted the majority in the West. In Geoffrey Gorer’s book *Africa Dances*, the sleeve notes indicate that, “Geoffrey Gorer went to Africa with Feral Benga, a famous black dancer, to study traditional dances”. Gorer reported on his travels through French West Africa in 1935 and repeated the inconsistencies regarding their customs and practices.

For a least a century they (*the Africans*) must almost certainly be under the guidance of foreigners, until they have learnt a common language, a common purpose and civic morality. A free Africa is today an unrealisable dream, whatever changes the misfortunes of war may bring. The ideal guidance would obviously be international and disinterested, developing the Negro until he can give the Western world the riches of his country, and receive from it the benefits that Western science could give him. But most probably short-sighted greed and folly will continue their present

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<sup>83</sup> P. Sterling Stuckey, ‘Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance’ in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. by Thomas F. DeFrantz (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp. 39-58 (p.39).

<sup>84</sup> P. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.47.

rake's progress, until in the greater part of Africa the Negro will become extinct, as the Zulus are already said to have become; in one or two places, such as the Gold Coast and Nigeria, they may linger in reserves, but all signs point to the African Negro following the Red Indian as the vanishing race.<sup>85</sup>

Gorer found little which pleased him in Africa. Writing of the Goro people, he remarked that, "they weren't handsome, but the men at any rate weren't so abysmally ugly as the other forest folk..... The women looked pretty awful and the marriage price of two to three thousand francs (the Goro buy their wives and children) seemed unduly high"<sup>86</sup> and although he recognised that Africans danced for everything in their lives, he maintained that "...they are consciously reviving Negro customs and dances in the spirit of English Morris dancers:..."<sup>87</sup> He understood little of the gestures and meaning of African dance, though he was aware that people do go into trances whilst they were dancing. Gorer later studied anthropology and began to provide a more structured context of the dances he had observed, though almost ten years after his visit, he was more conciliatory, admitting at a conference in 1944 "I am appearing here under false pretences. I know little about West Africa, and even less about dancing".<sup>88</sup>

As early European observers believed that African dance was lewd and immoral, it would appear that their preferences were for dance images that reflected their views and as such were invariably 'static' or simply of anyone at a dance presentation. See illustrations overleaf.

Within African society on the continent and in the diaspora, Africa's rituals continued, hence today, Africa's dance continues. The African - free or enslaved - was grounded in a strong cultural tradition but appropriated as necessary and imitated regularly, European cultural

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<sup>85</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *African dances* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), p.218.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.* p.207.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.* p.168.

<sup>88</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *Function of Dance Forms in Primitive African Communities*, in *The Function of dance in human society: A seminar*, Directed by Franziska Boas (The Boas School 323 West 21: New York 1944) pp 19-34. p.19





'A Dancing Man', Nigeria (1898) Photo: Capt. C.I.L Foulkes  
©The Royal Geographical Society





Gombe Dancers at Bosumanji, Belgian Congo (1947)  
Photo: Congo Press ©The Royal Geographical Society





'Basorge' - Dance, Belgian Congo (1908/09)  
Photo: E Torday ©The Royal Geographical Society



practices too. The Europeans, on the other hand, trivialised African cultural traditions, yet over the last two centuries, African cultural penetration, including its dancing forms, have impacted significantly on the dance styles of Europe and the West generally, though it is still to find *its own voice and space* in the UK.

Dance in African societies satisfies a purpose. It is governed by specific rules but not so rigidly defined so as to remain static in the face of environmental changes. Particularly in the area of social and popular dances, Africa has given to the world an entirely new, different and dynamic dance vocabulary as evidenced in reggae, Hip Hop and Urban dance, Salsa, Jazz, 'Street Dance', modern dance and contemporary African dance.<sup>89</sup> Though not notated, the movements in African dance are codified so that they can convey special messages within their societies and to others who seek to understand. As corner stones of African society, traditional religion and thus dance have survived as vibrant forms in their own right throughout the diaspora. According to V. Vasut

The rhythms and steps of our modern dances more than betray their Negro origin, and yet we (Europeans) seem to be unaware of it. We live under the spell of inherited conservative and rather stubborn prejudices that view the Negro dance-culture as an extremely primitive system of ecstatic motions around high camp-fires to the mysterious sounds of drums.<sup>90</sup>

Vasut is not a lone voice in recognising the contribution of African dance practice to world popular dances and as will be detailed in the following chapters, the influence of traditional religious practice, particularly from the Yoruba faith, has ensured that continuity.

### **(7) The Yoruba Belief System – From Covert to Overt Practice in the New World**

In 1872, Anna Hinderer reported that in Yorubaland the "religion is a system of idolatry" but yet today the Yoruba religion has millions of practitioners throughout the world. Its religious

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<sup>89</sup> Many of the sequences and choreography in almost every 'pop' dance video in the world contain movements from recreational dances of Africa.

<sup>90</sup> V.Vasut, 'Introduction' in *African dance: A Book of Photographs* by Dominique Darbois (Prague: Artia, 1962), p.7.

guidelines continue to control the lives of its adherents and coupled with its 'spiritual' dimension, it is providing inspiration for the performance arts both on the continent and in the diaspora. The underlying principles of the religion, especially its rituals and symbolism have taken deep roots in the Caribbean, and have been impacting Caribbean and African dance in England. Vocabulary, costumes, masks, gestures, rituals and symbols from social and religious dances of Africa, principally from Nigeria, Benin and Ghana have resurfaced in the diaspora in traditional and contemporary forms as new 'communities' and new 'audiences' participate and observe the traditions of *Sango*, *Nine Nights* (wake keeping), *Dinkie Minie*, *limbo*, *Egungun*, *Kumina*, *calypso*, *reggae*, *Atilogwu*, *The Warrior* and social dances in carnival.

Historical records show that in the New World today many of the black people are of African descent. Many have traced their genealogy to specific regions on the African continent and many are descendants of slaves who were from the Benin and Nigerian Yoruba ethnic communities. This fact is realised when one observes the proliferation of African religious practice and the development of music and dance in the West. As will be illustrated in subsequent chapters, the Yoruba belief system is on the ascendancy in the New World, influencing both the daily lives of large sections of black communities as well as impacting cultural development. Many Africans in the diaspora are making conscious choices about their heritage and to that end, many are finding a new, practical and spiritual force in accepting the Yoruba traditional religion. This particular form of worship is witnessed throughout the New World and according to Omófolábò S. Ajáyí

In the primordial times, according to Yoruba creation myth, were the sixteen principal 'orisa or deities to whom *Olodumare*, the Supreme God in Yoruba religious thought, had entrusted the task of establishing order out of the confusion below. Led by *Obatala*, and each with one (or more) specific task(s), the divine assistants landed at Ile-Ife, where the creation tasks began.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Omófolábò S. Ajáyí, *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998), p.43.



As E. Bolaji Idowu states “the full responsibility of all the affairs of the life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believe to be the interpreters of the will of the Deity”.<sup>92</sup> The foundation of their lives is governed by religious practice and within this context, there is always the search for balance between their physical existence and the environment. For the Yoruba people that is something they have been practicing for generations in ‘*Twontuwonsi*’ (a balanced existence).<sup>93</sup>

Wándé Abimbólá sees “*Ifa* as a thought system rather than anthropological study” and with increased research and sharing of information, in Africa and the New World, he believes that there will be a worldwide resurgence in the *orisa* and traditional religions. For the Yoruba community and

According to *Ifa* texts, the Yoruba believe there are two pantheons of supernatural powers who compete for the domination of the universe. They are *orisa*, who are also known as *irinwo* ‘*mole ojukotun*’ (four hundred supernatural powers of the right), and the *ajogun*, who are known as *igbaa* ‘*mole ojukosi*’ (two hundred supernatural powers of the left). The *orisa* are by their very nature benevolent to human beings while the *ajogun* are malevolent.<sup>94</sup>

The resurgence and universal interest in traditional African religious practice is now being encouraged and supported by many countries in Africa and as Nigeria has the capacity to promote culture as a part of its world role, Africans in the diaspora are rediscovering a rich spiritual up-liftment through these new international contexts. *Babalawos* (high priests/father of mysteries) are nurturing people into a re-alignment of self and “the *ashe* is the primal essence of all things”.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu quoted in *Religion*, (Nigeria: unpublished, undated article), p.37. Dr. Idowu is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan.

<sup>93</sup> Omofolabo S. Ajayi, op. cit. p.37-41.

<sup>94</sup> Wándé Abimbólá, ‘*Ifa: A West African Cosmological System*’ in *Religion in Africa*, ed. by Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis L Thomson (London: James Currey Ltd., 1994), p.102.

<sup>95</sup> See Baba Ifa Karade, op. cit. p.21. The Yoruba contend that the study of nature is foremost. Nature is viewed as the manifestation of Olodumare’s Essence through degrees of material substance. That essence, translated as *ashe*, is the inherent force of all creation.

Omosade Awolalu, in a similar vein, expressed the Yoruba belief in divinities and spirits and the necessity of man to honour them, because of their forces in society.

The indigenous Yoruba has a belief in the existence of a self-existent being who is believed to be responsible for the creation and maintenance of heaven and earth, of men and women, and who also brought into being divinities and spirits who are believed to be his functionaries in the theocratic world as well as intermediaries between mankind and the self-existent Being.<sup>96</sup>

In Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Brazil, the Yoruba belief system has taken solid root and Baba Ifa Karade in *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, is quoted at some length in this section as it outlines some basic principles and the philosophy of the Yoruba practice that is observed throughout the New World.

*Orisha* (head) as a term, is actually the combination of two Yoruba words. *Ori* which is the reflective spark consciousness embedded in human essence, and *sha* which is the ultimate potentiality of that consciousness to enter into or assimilate itself into the divine consciousness<sup>97</sup>.

African religious belief systems, as noted earlier, impact upon all aspects of community life and as far as music and dance are concerned, these have remained integral to the practice of the religion. According to Karade

Among the Yoruba, the expression of worship through dance and song is all encompassing. Every aspect of the religion finds its way through the human embodiment as movement and vocalization open the devotee to the *ashe* of the ancestors and/or the *orisha*.<sup>98</sup>

In traditional African communities, the Chief is often respected more for his dancing than any other skill and Chiefs who are good dancers have served long periods in positions of authority. The dance is the forum in which communities come together to celebrate, to pay homage, to give praise, to renew their bonds and ties with their fellow man. Dancing knits communities together. However Karade warned that

Often, the high priest of Yoruba are set to remind devotees that dance, in respect to religion, is beyond the superficial taking of *orisha* dance classes. *Orisha* dance is a form of prayer and empowerment centered on the body-temple. *Orisha* dance should not be separated from *Orisha* worship.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Omosade Awolalu quoted in Baba Ifa Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, op.cit. p.xii.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p.23.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* p.63.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* p.65.



Although there are hundreds of deities, there are a few who are honoured more than others and some of these are listed below. In particular the thunder God, *Sango* has many followers<sup>100</sup> in Africa and the New World. For Africans in the New World praising *Sango* would not have been a difficult choice for *Sango* represents resistance and power. As can be seen from the table that follows, he is the Protector/Warrior and gives strength and hope whilst also being the god of music and dance. Baba Ifa Karade points out that there are seven major *Orisha*<sup>101</sup> and these are detailed in Table 1 that follows. As Karade stated

The pouring of libation or *mojubar* (I give homage) is a prominent facet in regards to Yoruba reverence. The *mojubar* is given before all religious and social events. To give homage to the *orisha*, to the ancestors, to *Oludumare*, and to one's teachers or god-parents is a necessary step which needs to be taken before any endeavour is begun.<sup>102</sup>

Giving praise and thanks to ancestors, gods, families and communities is now commonplace at many events in the New World as Africans in the diaspora reinvigorate themselves, re-define who they are and re-emerge to continue the traditional cultural traditions of their forefathers and mothers. *Obatala*, *Oshun*, *Ogun*, *Sango* and many other deities are alive in Africa and in the New World and, as will be examined in chapter five, inform Traditional and Contemporary African Dance in England.

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<sup>100</sup> In orisa worship, families tend to worship one orisa, though they may be aware of others and pray to them.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* p.29.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.* p.63.

**TABLE 1**

**The Seven Major Orisha**

<b><u>ORISHA</u></b>	<b><u>ATTRIBUTES</u></b>
<b>OBATALA</b>	Creator of Human form, Elder of the Orisha, Wisdom, Purity, Morality, Strategy, High Intelligence, Peacemaker, Father, God of the White Cloth, Silver.
<b>ELEGBA</b>	Messenger of the Orisha, Courier of Offerings to the Orisha, Policeman of the Yoruba Cosmology, Guardian of the Cross-roads, Holder of Ashe (power) among the Orisha, Laterite Stone.
<b>OGUN</b>	Orisha of Iron, War, Creator of Civilisations, Courage, Strength, Justice and Oaths, Executioner, Pathmaker, Force, stabilisation, Security, Protection, Vehicles and Tools.
<b>YEMOJA</b>	Motherhood, Mother of Waters, Family, Sexuality, Sorcery, Primal Waters, Nurturer.
<b>OSHUN</b>	Sensuality, Fine Arts and Humanities, Love, Beauty, Graciousness, Gracefulness, Money, Sorcery, Luxury, Brass, Gold, Cowrie, Rivers, Intuition, Divination
<b>SHANGO</b>	Kingly, Stately, Orator, Sorcery, Virility, Dance, Music (drums), Masculinity, Business, Fire, Lightning, Stones, Protector/Warrior, Magnetism.
<b>OYA</b>	Tempest, Guardian of the Cemetery, Winds of Change, Warrior, Hurricanes, Storms, Death, Progression.



Where African peoples have migrated from one part of the continent to another or to overseas countries, they have often taken their music and dance with them.....This is the case among peoples of African descent now living in North America, South America and the West Indies. Some of them still observe religious festivals with dance and songs whose African words they do not understand....that shows how powerful music and dance are, in retaining and spreading religious ideas over wide areas and for a long period.<sup>1</sup>

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **African Dance In The Caribbean**

#### **(1) Re-construction, Accommodation and Re-presentation**

The diverse ethnic groupings, variance in languages and ‘shades of skin pigmentation’ encountered throughout the Caribbean (including Guyana), testify to the diversity of the region. For several centuries, Europeans, Africans, Arabs, Jews, North and South Americans, Indians and Chinese have been integrated into the fabric of Caribbean society and all, to a certain degree, have influenced Caribbean culture. Any attempt to exactly define either the people or the totality of ‘the’ culture will require de-construction to an extremely detailed level, and still, that exercise may not yield any significant results. Unquestionably though, Africa has left an indelible mark on the Caribbean. In the visual and performance arts, in political and economic activities and in religious observances and practices, the Caribbean is alive with Africa. Its influence is sprinkled more generously and more obviously on some particular shores and evidenced in the social construct and use of language, through religious practices, in the

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<sup>1</sup> John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991), p.27.

rich variety of food, through hairstyles and clothing and significantly, in the upsurge in spirituality and in the energy and enjoyment through expressions in music and dance, the latter both in secular and sacred settings.

African slaves, surreptitiously and openly, re-created an environment for their survival in the Caribbean, one in which their traditional belief systems were deeply planted.

Dance, as non-verbal communication, required no particular circumstances to re-introduce itself in the Caribbean and found regular expression as slaves celebrated birth, marriages, harvest, worship and death. In spite of the attempts by the governing nations to silence their cultural traditions, traditional religious rituals, music and dance seeped into everyday practices. The re-introduction and nature of the practice into the Caribbean has to be understood against a context in which the forms contributed to and accommodated practices from other religious and cultural practices. Those forms, particularly through religious practice and social events, later found new energies and expression in the UK with immigrants in the 1940s.

In dance, slaves incorporated Christian symbolisms to their practiced forms, in order to continue functioning under the strict regulations of the controlling classes but ‘traditional’ forms re-emerged. In the English speaking Caribbean, the *Kumina*, the *Jonkunnu*, the *Bruckin’s* and the *Dinkie Minie* flourished in Jamaica; in Trinidad and Tobago, the *Bongo*, the *Sango*, the *limbo*, the *Rada* found expression; in Barbados the *Joe and Johnny*, popular dances associated with *Crop Over* and the *Maypole* (associated with the *Landship* and Tuk Bands) emerged, and in Guyana, the *Masquerade*, *rope dancing* and the *S’iku* evolved. Many of these forms still inform African dance development in the UK and are finding new expression in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



In establishing continuity between the dance forms, through connecting the threads between religious practices and the development of African dance throughout the Caribbean, this chapter will focus particularly on dance development in Jamaica and on the twin island-state of Trinidad and Tobago. These inter-connections will show how traditional African cultural practices took root and developed, prior and subsequent to, Emancipation on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1834 and how these forms from the Caribbean eventually manifested themselves in the UK several centuries later in music and dance. It will conclude by showing that traditional African dance is still practiced in the Caribbean and the sacred, like the secular forms, have been popularised and appear regularly on stages as social entertainment.

## (2) Slavery and Cultural Transmission

African dance arrived in the Caribbean through slavery and it is quite plausible that the forced routine of exercising slaves on the slave ships enabled African traditional cultural practices (specifically drumming and dancing) to remain intact. In a Parliamentary Committee Report, *Respecting the transportation of the natives of Africa, in British ships, to the West Indies and elsewhere*, Robert Norris, a Carolina merchant trading at Liverpool stated that

The Space between the Decks is appointed entirely for their lodging; every attention is paid to keep that as clean as possible; the Negroes are kept on Deck all Day, if the Weather be fine; they are fed with Two meals of comfortable wholesome Victuals; they are supplied with the little Luxurie of Pipes and Tobacco, and a Dram occasionally, when the Coldness of the Weather requires it; they are supplied with the Musical Instruments of their country; they are encouraged to be cheerful, to sing and to dance, and they do both;...<sup>2</sup>

Historical deciphering would lead one to believe that this reporting of the transportation of the slaves was quite economical with the truth, but at least it highlighted that, whether forced or not, Africans were provided with some opportunities to relieve the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Minutes of Evidence on the Slave Trade 1788-1789' in *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed.by Sheila Lambert (London: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), vol.68. p.4.

brutality on the ships through participation in their music and dancing. Under cross-examination, the dialogue continued:

Mr. Piggott:	Are the Negroes brought upon Deck in Fetters?
Robert Norris:	Yes; the Fetters are always continued on their Legs as long as they remain on the Coast, unless Sickness requires them to be taken off.
Mr. Piggott:	Are they not frequently obliged to dance for Exercise?
Robert Norris:	No.
Mr. Piggott:	When they dance do they dance in Fetters?
Robert Norris:	The Thing is this, the Men sing their country songs and the Boys dance to amuse them. <sup>3</sup>

It would seem highly improbable that African slaves would have readily accepted an invitation to dance in iron fetters and it would not take much imaginative thought to appreciate that ‘the encouragement to be cheerful and to sing and dance’ was conducted under duress and no doubt, encouraged with the whip. The ‘cargo’ had to be in prime condition and thus regular exercise was a part of the regime on those slave ships.

‘Dancing the slaves’ was a regular activity and John Mathews, a Lieutenant in His Majesty’s Navy, provided this narrative of how slaves were treated.

I cannot do it better than by giving the history of the journal of one day: - The slaves were got upon deck about eight in the morning; the first thing that is done, is, there are tubs of water to wash their hands and face; the surgeon then goes through, and examines if they have any sores or complaints; about ten o’clock they have their Mess – for breakfast; after that is done, they have water to wash, or go to the tubs to wash their hands; they are then served with water to drink; about eleven o’clock if the weather is fine, they wash all over, and anoint themselves with oil; about twelve they are in general, not always, with a little bread, and a Dram, if they are supposed to require it, it not being a general custom; the intermediate part of the day, between twelve and four, they amuse themselves with singing, dancing or games of chance...<sup>4</sup>

Mathews’ account gives the impression that slaves were routinely cared for in humane manner, but that was not the case. Lynne Fauley Emery in *Black Dance* provided alternative and more realistic commentaries of how slave traders used the whip to encourage the amusement and dancing by the slaves. She indicated that

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.19.



The African was forced to dance in bondage and under the lash. He danced because the white ruler wanted his stock in good condition. He danced not for love, nor joy, nor religious celebration, nor even to pass the time; he danced in answer to the whip. He danced for survival.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the reasons, slaves danced, and given the inextricable links between dance and religious practice, it could be assumed that even through the punishment to encourage the dancing, the slaves would have also rejuvenated themselves spiritually. African drumming determines the specificity of the dance and appreciating the conditions under which the slaves were being transported, it seems likely that movements and rhythms from ceremonial dances (including war dances) would have been used rather than social ones; these forms inherently containing coded messages, symbolic resistance and deep spiritual connections. Through their use of symbols, language and gestures they would have communicated between each other and also with their deities and ancestral spirits. The legitimisation of this practice on the ships enabled slaves to maintain their links between Africa and their gods and retain their traditions for implantation on new lands.

### (3) European Expansion and the Colonisation of the Caribbean

During the 15th century, for practical purposes, Pope Alexander VI divided the world into two.

All lands west of the Azores and Cape Verde islands were given to Spain and those to the east to Portugal. This meant that North, Central and South America and the West Indian Islands, the 'New World', "belonged" to Spain; while Africa and Asia "belonged" to Portugal.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ivan Van Sertima, "this line, as proposed by Don Juan on the strength of his intelligence from Guinea, was finally settled by the two great powers at the Treaty of

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<sup>5</sup> op. cit. p.12. See especially pages 6 – 12 for slave dancing on the ships.

<sup>6</sup> The National Library of Jamaica and The Urban Development Corporation, *Freedom To Be: The Abolition of Slavery in Jamaica and its Aftermath* (Jamaica: The National Library of Jamaica and The Urban Development Corporation, 1997), p.1.

Tordesillas a year later – on June 7, 1494”.<sup>7</sup> John Henrik Clarke however saw this arbitrary European division of the world as a plank in economic expansion and avarice, adding “Christopher Columbus is the best known of a number of Western thugs who has been presented to the world as a hero and a discoverer”.<sup>8</sup>

As Spain and Portugal were heavily involved in the African slave trade, the Caribbean was peopled with Africans from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and thus African traditional cultural practices would have surfaced around that period. From the African continent to the Caribbean, beyond emancipation, there was a regular and consistent flow of human cargo. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century slaves constituted the majority labour force and the economy of the islands changed as the cash-crop tobacco was replaced with the production of sugar cane. Indigenous communities were decimated; Irish and Scottish workers resented the harsh treatment meted out to them and departed and African slaves filled the labour force up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. African cultural practice survived as Africans grafted Christianity onto their traditional African forms of worship but continued to acknowledge their gods and their ancestors. Where languages were modified to promote a modicum of verbal communications, dance and religious practice required only minor changes. Today, the presence of Africa is everywhere pronounced and vibrant in the Caribbean.

Its most obvious consequence, written in black and white, is the presence of some 60 million people of African descent in that part of the Atlantic Basin which extends from Brazil through Surinam, the Guianas, the Caribbean, the southern and eastern seaboard of the United States to the Great lakes. People of African descent form a preponderant majority in the older plantation islands of the Caribbean, Barbados, Tobago, the Leewards and Windwards, Jamaica and Haiti; they form a large proportion of the population of Guyana, Surinam and Trinidad; they constitute a large proportion of the population of Brazil and of the United States.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ivan Van Sertima, *The African Presence in Ancient America: They Came Before Columbus* (New York and Toronto: Random House Inc., 1976), p.7.

<sup>8</sup> John Henrik Clarke, op. cit. p.66.

<sup>9</sup> J H Parry, Philip Sherlock, Anthony Maingot, *A Short History of the West Indies* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1991), p.91.



#### (4) Traditional Religious Practice – Resistance and Continuity

Cultural practices from the African continent resurfaced in the Caribbean through a variety of mechanisms. John Luffman, a traveller, observed one particular form of this practice in Antigua. He wrote to a friend about a funeral mentioning that “the first thing that presented itself was the coffin of the deceased, which was placed upon two tables, and three or four mulatto women crying and making a noise over it”.<sup>10</sup> The Africans as detailed in chapter one, saw death as a release, in this case, from the burdens of slavery. The outpourings by these women would have been normal as they gathered to pay their final respects. Although no specific mention was made of any traditional rites, placing the coffin on tables indicated that some kind of communal celebrations were about to take place. Some years later, Capt. J.E Alexander gave a more detailed account of an African traditional funeral, highlighting the continuity of religion and rituals throughout the Caribbean. He wrote

The Negroes from some countries think they return to their own country when they die in Jamaica, and therefore regard death but little, imagining they shall change their condition, by that means from servile to free, and so for this reason often cut their own throats. Whether they die thus, or naturally, their country people make great lamentations, mournings and howlings about them expiring, and at their funeral throw in rum and victuals into their graves, to serve them in the other world.<sup>11</sup>

Luffman and Alexander were reporting about the funeral rites they witnessed, but the tradition of *preparing the deceased* for the safe journey to meet other ancestors would have begun several days before and included ‘wake keeping’, this latter celebration still finding expression in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain amongst black communities and

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<sup>10</sup> John Luffman, *A Brief Account of the Island of Antigua, Together with the Customs and manners of its Inhabitants as well white as black: also, an Accurate Statement of the food, clothing, labor [sic] and Punishment of slaves* (London: June 24 1787), p.73. Letters to a Friend. Written in the Years 1786, 1787, 1788,

<sup>11</sup> Capt. J. E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, comprising visits to the most interesting scenes in North and South America and the West Indies. With notes on Negro Slavery and Canadian Emigration* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), vol.II, p.xlviii.

through theatrical dance productions [Kokuma Dance Theatre (*Nine Nights*) and H. Patten Dance Theatre (*Dis Ya Set Up*)].

As many Africans persisted with their rituals and symbolic forms of worship, missionaries were introduced to coerce Africans to abandon their forms of religious practice and accept Christianity. The slaves however vacillated between traditional and Christian religious practices and often returned to their traditional practice, regardless of their instructions for Christian baptism. Alex Robb recalled

I had a meeting with those of my people who live on a neighbouring estate, to examine into a case of moral delinquency, of which I had just heard. It appeared that their master had taken possession of the property, that he gave a dance to his people on Sunday last, and kept it up until four o'clock on Sabbath morning....Some were there for whom I had a high esteem who have been my steadiest people, and who were most eager in their pursuit after knowledge. They had told me that they did not know the impropriety of their conduct.....<sup>12</sup>

'Eager in their pursuit after knowledge' illustrated a desire to rise above slavery though it did not necessarily imply that that knowledge equated to conversion to Christianity.

C.G.A Oldendorp epitomised the misunderstanding of his European colleagues when he wrote about slaves on the Danish West Indian islands.

Heathen Negroes live totally without religious observation. They left behind their Gods in Guinea, and particular care was being taken as they were shipped to the West Indies that they were not able to take their fetishes along with them. Neither have they priests, nor are they permitted to worship their Gods in public. When one considers the blind zeal with which even the most ignorant people often cling to their religion, which they perhaps do not even understand in the slightest, it cannot be denied that this lack of religious practice must be painfully felt by many Negroes.<sup>13</sup>

The traditional religions of the African people required no written words, their gods were everywhere and they were in close communion with their ancestral spirits. Where

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. Alex Robb, *The Gospel to the Africans: A narrative of the life and labours of the Rev. William Jameson in Jamaica and Old Calabar* (London: Andrew Elliot Publishers, 1861), p.76 –77.

<sup>13</sup> C.G.A Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission: History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, trans. by Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir (USA: Karoma Publishers Inc., 1987), p.262.



they were not allowed to take fetishes with them, they found alternatives and the banjo and the drum were used to invoke their ancestral spirits. The connection to the continent was invisible but the power and influence of Africa's traditional religious practice persisted, especially through the beat of the drum and the *continuity of dance practice*.

Resistance through religious practice was not solely the prerogative of the slaves on the British controlled environs for in the Danish West Indies the African slaves displayed their distaste of slavery through several uprisings. Some of the more important ones occurred on the island of St. John (1733-34) and on St. Croix (1746 and 1759).

According to A.R Highfield

The Moravians were particularly perplexed by what might be termed 'cultural resistance', that is to say, the stubborn adherence on the part of some slaves to certain African modes of behaviour in circumstances where a European or Christian alternative had been offered as a replacement. African music, dance, religion, and language were the practices of this kind which appear most frequently in the Moravian records.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the period of external occupation in Haiti, and certainly after emancipation, the African communities were banned from practising any form of African cultural practices and yet as Acelius E. Isaac wrote

Anyone who tries to understand most of the beliefs, practices and philosophy of the Haitians should take a closer look at the African religion, which, as Voodoo, is a way of life.

Voodoo in terms of beliefs, practices and philosophy is so natural and even innate in the Haitians that many are not aware of it;<sup>15</sup>

African religious practice had taken roots in the Caribbean as a way of life. Geoffrey Parrinder highlighted this continuity of African religious practice and indicated that the use of drums and dances were still integral to their worship. He observed that "although

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<sup>14</sup> A. R. Highfield, *Patterns of Accommodation and Resistance. The Moravian Witness to Slavery in the Danish West Indies* (The Virgin Islands: Antilles Press, 1996) p.152.

<sup>15</sup> Acelius E. Isaac, 'The Influence of Voodoo on the lives of the Haitian People', *Jamaica Journal*, vol.9 no.4 (publication n.d), 2-4 & 6-7 & 9-11 (p.2-3).

slaves were transported physically naked across the Atlantic, many religious beliefs were retained and practices resumed when possible”.<sup>16</sup> Byron Foster in his study of *Spirit possession in the Garifuna communities of Belize* located this invocation of the spirits in helping to cure the ills within a community.

Sequences of spirit possessions thus culminate in the performance of the curing ritual, *dugu*. The purpose of the rite is to placate (*amaliha*) the ancestors, who are believed to have afflicted their descendants, and hence to remove the cause of the affliction.<sup>17</sup>

Calling upon ancestors was commonplace. Elizabeth Thomas-Hope wrote that

Slavery itself made religious syncretism inevitable, but it did not completely destroy the former religions at the level of interpretation and consciousness. A general conceptual framework concerning life, death and the supernatural was inherited from Africa, and for many Caribbean people of whatever church, this still gives comprehensible explanations for illness and misfortune.<sup>18</sup>

The connecting threads of African cultural development were evident in the Caribbean though undoubtedly they were being recast to suit the vagaries of the new environment. Traumatized Africans would have replicated modes of behaviour similar to those on the continent and therefore what have survived through *practice* are the core essences of their cultural traditions. It was through the adaptation to new environmental situations that has seen the creativity of the black communities escalate to a new plateau. The spirituality of the African surfaced through ‘the matrix of beliefs, power, values and behaviours’ that they developed as mechanisms of survival. Re-energising dilapidated

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<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, ‘The African Spiritual Universe’ in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, ed. by Brian Gates (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1980), pp. 16-25 (p.23).

<sup>17</sup> Byron Foster, *Heart Drum: Spirit Possession in the Garifuna communities of Belize* (Belize: Cubola Productions, 1986), p.41.

Foster describes the religious practice of the Garifuna people as neither African nor Amerindian, but as an ‘original formulation’ utilising elements of both the old and the new society.

*Dugu* is defined as a ‘placatory ritual, conducted by a spirit medium, designed to propitiate, those ancestors regarded as afflicting the living’. p.6.

As this form of religious practice is commonplace within many African societies and had some roots in the African tradition, it is thus perceived as and incorporated as the religious practice of Africans.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, ‘The Pattern of Caribbean Religions’ in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, ed. by Brian Gates (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1980), pp. 4-15 (p.9).



black souls with the spirit of Africa was not a figment of the imagination for as Wándé Abímbólá indicated

During the slave trade, Ifa was *exported* by African slaves to many parts of the Americas, especially Cuba. There, an important community of Ifa priests existed for hundreds of years before they dispersed to other Caribbean and American countries because of the Communist revolution in Cuba in the late fifties and early sixties.<sup>19</sup> [My emphasis]

Priests, elders, trained musicians, griots, all formed part of the slave cargo and contributed to the proliferation of a variety of traditional African religious practices in the New World. In his study on Afro-Caribbean religious practice, Geoffrey Parrinder notes that

Music is a great link, and similar types of drums are used on both sides of the Atlantic. Dances in honour of the gods, of various kings, are popular and are conducted by dedicated servants of the deity as well as taken up by enthusiastic bystanders....Possession of the dancer by the spirit is common in both continents, trance states and ecstatic utterances are taken as proof of the presence and power of the deity or ancestor.<sup>20</sup>

##### (5) British Attitude to Dance in the Caribbean

British attitudes to African dance in the Caribbean strikingly mirrored their reactions to the forms in Africa. In 1707 the British medical doctor Sir Hans Sloane reported on the lifestyle, music and dance of newly arrived slaves. He wrote that

...the Negroes are much given to Venery, and although hard wrought, will at nights, or on Feast days Dance and Sing; their songs are all bawdy, and leading that way. They have several sorts of Instruments in imitation of Lutes, made of small Gourds fitted with Necks, strung with Horse hairs or the peeled stalks of climbing Plants or Withs.....<sup>21</sup>

Their Dances consist in great activity and strength of Body, and keeping time, if it can be. They very often tie Cow Tails to their Rumps, and add such other odd

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<sup>19</sup> Wándé Abímbólá, 'Ifá: a West African Cosmological System' in *Religion in Africa*, ed. by Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis L Thomas (London: James Currey, 1994), pp. 100-116 (p.101).

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, 'The African Spiritual Universe' in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, ed. by Brian Gates (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1980), pp. 16-25 (p.23).

<sup>21</sup> Sir Hans Sloane: *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, Etc. of the Last of Those Islands; to which is prefix'd An Introduction, wherein is an Account of the Inhabitants, Air, Waters, Diseases, Trade, etc. of that Place, with Some Relations concerning the Neighbouring Continent, and Islands of America* (London: B.M, 1707) vol.I p.xlviii.

things to their Bodies in several places, as gives them a very extraordinary appearance.<sup>22</sup>

In Sloane's commentary 'their songs are all bawdy', their instruments in imitation of European instruments, their dances of no timing whatsoever and the adornments simply to create 'an extraordinary appearance'. Sloane was simply reflecting the attitudes of the prevailing class. From the description of the instrument with the gourd, it probably was the Gonje (a one-stringed instrument from West Africa) or the Kora (from Senegambia, though these tend to have more than one string) and its sound is quite different from any British instrument. The costuming of the dancers and the use of attachments to their bodies was in keeping with the masquerade tradition found almost throughout Africa. This style of costume remains a part of the *Jonkunnu* and *Buru* dance forms in Jamaica.

Up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europeans found the music and dance of Africans in Antigua "not altogether graceful".<sup>23</sup> Luffman noted that

Negroes are very fond of the discordant notes of the banjar (banjo), and the hollow sound of the toombah.....This instrument is the invention of, and was brought here by the African Negroes, who are most expert in the performances thereon.<sup>24</sup>

The toombah is familiar to the tabor, and has gingles of tin or shells; to this music (if it deserves the name) I have seen a hundred or more dancing at a time, their gestures are extravagant, but not more so than the principal dancers at your Opera-house, and, I believe, were some of their steps and motions introduced into the public amusements at home, by French or Italian dancers, they would be well received; I do not mean, by the bye, to indicate that the movement by these sables are altogether graceful, but their agility and surprising command of their limbs, is astonishing;<sup>25</sup>

Although the dancing and music was not to his liking, he noted that there were a hundred or more dancing and this would not have been unusual as slaves joined

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p.xlix.

<sup>23</sup> John Luffman, *op. cit.* p.13.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p.135.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p.136.



together to celebrate and enjoy their 'free time'. Although Luffman remarked on the 'surprising command of their limbs' it is worth noting that unlike ballet, Africans did not leap or jump in the European way of dancing but shuffled their feet firmly on the ground. This practice and deliberate style of not wishing to defy gravity (through balletic jumps) signals the African's affirmation and belief in 'mother earth' and the maintenance of having that close contact with the earth during dance movements.

Africans continued to socialise in their traditional ways as George Pinckard observed

The dance consists of stamping of the feet, twistings of the body, and *a number of strange indecent attitudes*. It is severe bodily exertion- more bodily indeed than you can well imagine, for the limbs have little to do with it. The head is held erect, or, occasionally, inclined a little forward; the hands nearly meet before; the elbows are fixed, pointing from the sides; and, the lower extremities being held rigid, the whole person thus moved without lifting the feet from the ground. Making the head and limbs fixed points, they writhe and turn the body upon its own axis, slowly advancing towards each other, or retreating to the outer parts of the ring.<sup>26</sup> [my italics]

Dancing and associated rituals accommodated new life experiences and Africans produced new cultural modes of communication but the drumming and dancing continued. In his observations of the Creoles and the slaves in Barbados, Pinckard wrote

They assemble, in crowds, upon the open green, or in any square or corner of the town, and forming in a ring in the centre of the throng, dance to the sound of their beloved music, and the singing of their favourite African yell. *Both music and dance are of a savage nature*. Their songs are very simple, but harsh and devoid of melody.<sup>27</sup> [My italics]

Although he reported at length on the formation and general movements, his lack of understanding of or the purpose and meaning of the dance thus reduced his comments to the familiar dismissive tone. He continued

Their approaches, with the figure of the dance, and *the attitudes and inflexions in which they are made, are highly indecent*; but of this they seem to be wholly unconscious, for the gravity, I might say the solemnity of countenance, under

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<sup>26</sup> George Pinckard M.D, *Notes on the West Indies, including observations relative to the Creoles and slaves of the Western Colonies and the Indians of South America. Interspersed with remarks upon the seasoning or Yellow Fever of hot climates* (London: Baldwin, Craddock and Joy, and L.B. Seeley, 1816), vol.I p.127-128.

<sup>27</sup> op. cit. p.126-127.

which all this passes, is peculiarly striking, indeed almost ridiculous.<sup>28</sup> [My italics]

Pinckard defined the music and dance as ‘savage in nature’, ‘simple’ and ‘indecent’, partly through his lack of understanding of what he was witnessing and also from a viewpoint which found the articulation of movement and the emotional display conveyed through the human body, in direct opposition to the accepted British ‘norms’. The dances he observed in the Caribbean had *a role and purpose* in the lives of the people; collective participation provided emotional, mental and spiritual upliftment, it was ‘communicative functionality’ as well as a social event. As Richard Dunn gleaned from British reports,

At night and on weekends they sang and danced. The English disliked the racket they made with trumpets and African hollow-log drums and banned the drums for another reason, because they could be used to signal island-wide revolts. So the slaves made music with calabash gourds fitted out with twine or horsehair strings. The dancers tied rattles to their legs and wrists and cow tails to their rumps, while the onlookers clapped hands rhythmically and chanted.<sup>29</sup>

Africans were uninhibited in their participation in either social or sacred dancing and A.R. Highfield confirmed that these activities continued to be a problem for the authorities. He added “that the persistent return to African music and dancing on the part of the slaves continued to pose a thorny problem for the Moravians,...”.<sup>30</sup> In order to harness the energies of the black communities away from cultural practices to the more mundane routine of slave labour, the British used their power to legislate.

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.127-128.

<sup>29</sup> Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), p.250.



## (6) British Legislation to Suppress African Cultural Practices

During the periods of slavery the British wanted to ensure that their subjects in the Caribbean presented them with little or no problems. On the African continent drumming was used for several purposes and as the British perceived the drums as a threat, they were keen to curtail its practice on the islands. Legislation offered one route to secure that condition. From England, *An Act for the making of Slaves Real Estate, and the better Government of Slaves and Free Negroes* was ratified for St. Vincent and many other Caribbean islands in 1727. Clause VIII stated:

(anyone who)...shall suffer any slaves to beat any drum or empty cask, or great Gourds, or to blow horns, shells, or loud Instruments for the Diversion or Entertainment of Slaves in his, her, or their Plantation, he, she, or they shall forfeit Twenty Pounds Current Money of the Island for every such offence, unless they suppress the same in One Hour after it begins;....<sup>31</sup>

This pattern of legislation was common throughout the Caribbean in an attempt to eliminate both African cultural practice and any threats of rebellion. Music, dancing and the drum were banned as they were perceived as a definite threat. Hans Sloane, some years earlier had noted that, “making use of these (drums) in their wars at home in Africa, it was thought too much inciting them to Rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island”.<sup>32</sup> The banning of the instrument reflected the frustration of the dominant power in its failure to control ‘the other’. The drum was the symbol of African resistance and functioned as the ‘heart beat’ of the population. Its coded patterns and complicated polyrhythms totally excluded Europeans who were more accustomed to “songs, and a duet for tenor and violin”.<sup>33</sup>

Legislation continued and in Dominica, an Act for *the Suppression of Runaway Slaves* stated

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<sup>30</sup> op. cit. p.153.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Minutes of Evidence on the Slave Trade 1788-1790’ in *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed.by Sheila Lambert (London: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), vol.67. p.31.

<sup>32</sup> op. cit. p.lii.

<sup>33</sup> *The Barbados Gazette* vol. IV. From Saturday July 21 to Wednesday July 25, 1787.

And whereas it is a common practice for Negroes and other slaves to meet in great companies in the several towns and other places in the island on the Lord's Day, feasting, drinking, dancing, and gaming, from which many quarrels and disturbances arise; Be it therefore enacted by the Authority aforesaid, that on every Lord's Day, and holidays hereafter mentioned, the constables of the several towns, and of the respective parishes in this island, are hereby required and directed to go into the several market places in the said towns or other places, at the hour of two O'clock on every Sunday and every such holiday.<sup>34</sup>

The legislation was clearly aimed at controlling the numbers at public events and ensuring that slaves returned to their plantations during daylight. Such Laws and Acts relating to the treatment of slaves by the government and Local Councils were numerous as the following table from the Caribbean of 1816 illustrates.

**TABLE 2<sup>35</sup>**  
**Acts Passed in the Caribbean**

Names of Colonies	Numbers of Acts presented
Antigua	2
Bahamas	12
Barbados	4
Bermuda	2
Dominica	9
Grenada	8
Jamaica	15
Nevis	2
St. Christopher (St Kitts)	5
St. Vincent	5
Tobago	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>

In the Bahamas, in 1816, the Colonial Laws relating to the Treatment of Slaves stated in Clauses 41 and 42

And be it further enacted by the Authority Aforesaid, That if any master, owner, guardian or attorney of any plantation or settlement, shall suffer any strange

<sup>34</sup> 'Slave Trade 1788- 1790. Copy of an Act of the Legislature for the Suppression of Runaway Slaves' in *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed.by Sheila Lambert (London: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1975), vol. 67 p.8.

<sup>35</sup> 'Colonial Laws Relating to the Treatment of Slaves' in *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* (XIX 257, 1816), p.266.



slaves, exceeding twelve in number, to assemble together, and beat their drums or blow their horns, or shells in any place under his or her care or management, or shall not endeavour to disperse or prevent such meeting, by giving notice thereof to the next Magistrate or Commissioned Officer, that master, owner, or guardian or attorney, shall forfeit for every such offence the sum of fifty pounds; provided information of such offence be given upon oath within five days after the commission of such offence.

And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That all officers, civil and military, shall be and they are hereby empowered and required to enter into any place whatever, in order to disperse any unlawful assembly of slaves, and to suppress and prevent all riotous unlawful drumming or other noise; any law, custom, or usage to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>36</sup>

In Jamaica slave revolts against the colonisers were frequent and slaves destroyed the property of more white institutions than any of the other British speaking Caribbean islands, hence, there was more legislation on that island than on most of the others.

The banning of the drums was relaxed later on some islands, largely due to the persistence of its use by slaves and partially through the fear the masters had from banning them. The social conditions of the vast majority of slaves remained dire although *The Slave Act of 1788*, in Dominica, recorded in Clause 3 that there is a duty on the owners of slaves

To convene slaves every Sunday for the purpose of divine worship, and to encourage baptisms and marriages among the slaves. And whereas a relaxation from labour on certain days of the year, and in indulgence in innocent recreations and amusements, would tend to improve the contentment of the slaves, certain holidays are appointed, and, slaves are permitted the use of any instrument of music, for the purpose of dancing.<sup>37</sup>

This relaxation of the law openly acknowledged that the authorities were failing in their efforts to decimate the traditional cultural practices of the slaves. Plantation owners were fined, laws were enacted and slaves were badly mistreated if they were found engaging in African cultural practices, but the regular practice of traditional cultural

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p.275.

<sup>37</sup> 'Second Report of the Commissioner, & C on the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies', in *House of Commons Papers*, vol. XXVI 1826 p.29.

events amongst the black communities in the Caribbean continued. The introduction of numerous laws banning African music and dance was a certain indicator that *there was continuity in the practiced form* and that the British felt threatened by its continuance.

## (7) Issues of Identity in the Caribbean

### (i) Issues of Identity after Emancipation

With the emancipation of slavery, the status, though not the position, of the black person changed. Technically, “in 1838, the former slaves became citizens and gained the legal rights of other members of society”<sup>38</sup> though “the majority of the population had no political rights as they had no one to speak on their behalf, or to further their interests. They were still at the mercy of the same class which had been their masters in the days of slavery”.<sup>39</sup>

In the *Report of Special Justice Henry Walsh, dated Derry Police Station, Pear-Tree Grove, P.O., October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1835*, he reported of Jamaica that

I am proud to say, that the Negroes have improved in every manner to meet my expectations respecting my Sovereign and his subject’s emancipation; they have improved both in morals and virtue; they have become rational on all matters connected with their duties, and have surpassed my first view.<sup>40</sup>

According to Walsh, the black communities had changed enormously since they first arrived on the island and had ‘improved both in morals and virtue’. The years of subjugation coupled with the strong social, economical and political control the colonisers still wielded over its islands, meant that emancipated blacks were unclear of their own futures and required time to adjust to the new situation. The Governor of

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<sup>38</sup> The National Library of Jamaica and The Urban Development Corporation, *Freedom To Be: The Abolition of Slavery in Jamaica and its Aftermath* (Jamaica: The National Library of Jamaica and The Urban Development Corporation, 1997), p.51.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p.51.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Report of Special Justice Henry Walsh, dated Derry Police Station, Pear-Tree Grove, P.O., October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1835 in The Treatment of Slaves, Colonial Laws Relating to the Treatment of Slaves’, *House of Common Papers*, 1836. vol XLVIII pp. 92-189 (p.160).



Guiana was not certain that they had ‘become rational on all matters’ and reminded the local black communities that there were sugar plantations that still needed labour. His message to free Africans, four months after emancipation, was simple.

I do not hear of any of you leaving this colony to seek your fortune elsewhere, and I do not believe the *delights of a savage life*, have tempted any of you to the land of your Forefathers,.....In the land of your Forefathers, the ground is cultivated, *but the people are naked, have neither arts nor commerce.*<sup>41</sup> [My italics]

The institutions of power on many islands ensured a hierarchical system of governance and the vast majority of free blacks were maintained in a lowly position. If, as many blacks were encouraged to believe, Africa had no cultural traditions but the British did, then forced or otherwise, it was easier to gravitate to the observed British ‘values’ around them. For some, aspirations towards British standards assumed significance; for others, affinity to Africa was paramount. The social ordering of life and the supposed freedom of the blacks were meant to orchestrate a new era on the islands but this appeared not to be the case. In *Emancipation in the West Indies: A six months’ tour in Antigua, Barbados and Jamaica*, Jas. A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball reported that

During slavery these villages were often times a scene of bickering, revelry and contention. One might hear the inmates revelling and shouting till midnight. Sometimes it will be kept up till morning. Such scenes have much decreased, and instead of the obscene and heathen songs which they used to sing, they are learning hymns from the lips of their children.<sup>42</sup>

This favourable reporting on the progress of the black communities following emancipation conveyed the impression that there were no barriers to the progress of the free communities. That was not the case and the social status of the blacks remained anchored to the bottom of society. The majority of free blacks after emancipation remained in the Caribbean although “in 1865 a shipload of 346 Barbadians emigrated to Liberia under the auspices of a North American group, the American Colonisation

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<sup>41</sup> *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette*. Tuesday January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1839. vol.1 no.5 p.4. The address by His Excellency Governor Light to the free labourers of British Guiana.

Society”.<sup>43</sup> Caribbean societies were differentiated along lines of colour, culture and wealth and the poorer sections of the black communities maintained ‘an African’ connection. For the masses, Edward Kamau Braithwaite indicated that

It was this drumming, which the authorities and the missionaries tried unsuccessfully to eradicate by legislation and persuasion, respectively, which retained and transmitted important and distinctive elements of African/folk culture into the period after emancipation.<sup>44</sup>

Culturally the British promoted British events for its ruling classes. In Trinidad there was music, singing and dancing as the following advertisements indicate.

#### Music & Singing

A Lady who has studied the Piano Fort(e)  
under eminent German Masters, is  
desirous meeting with a few pupils –  
Juveniles preferred.  
Apply personally from 10 to 4 at the  
“Alma Hotel”, Kings Wharf Street.  
Port – of – Spain, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1856.<sup>45</sup>

and

#### The Phoenix Dancing Club

The Fourth Annual Blue Dance will take place on  
Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1917, at the L’Union  
Francaise Hall, Corner Duke and George Street.  
Motorcars will convey ladies to the hall. Champagne  
and cakes will be served. Music will be supplied by  
the Phoenix String Band – S. Lewis, Manager;  
S. Williams, Secretary.<sup>46</sup>

The impact of those events would have penetrated the conscious minds of some sections of the majority population as they witnessed them from the distance and ‘Britishness’ and fairness of complexion would have been equated to privilege and social decorum.

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<sup>42</sup> *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette*. Tuesday February 5<sup>th</sup> 1839. vol.1 no.11. p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Tony Martin, *The Pan – African Connection: From Slavery to Garvey and Beyond* (London: First Majority Press, 1984), p.9.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *Folk Culture of the Slaves of Jamaica* (Port of Spain and London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1981), p.23.

<sup>45</sup> *The Trinidad Sentinel*. Friday August 8, 1856. vol.1. no.61. p.2.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The Phoenix Dancing Club’ in *The Trinidad Guardian*, September 6 1917, p.10.



During the early periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Chess playing has taken a new lease of life at the Royal Victoria Institute”<sup>47</sup> and classical concerts (voices and orchestras), cricket, football and boxing were very well established in Port-of-Spain. There were no references to or advertisements for any cultural events of African heritage. The majority of free blacks were mentally and physically in a ‘state of limbo’, observing but not being able to participate in the visible cultural activities of the elite thus the power of the drum and the expression of ‘self’ through the human body, flourished amongst the lower classes throughout the islands.

Prior to and after the independence of many Caribbean islands, the re-construction and re-alignment of ‘self’ was aided by politicians and academics in the Caribbean<sup>48</sup> pointing out the fallacies of history and presenting positive self-images of Africa and its people. ‘Pan –African’ intellectuals and ‘preachers’ including W.E.B Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Eric Williams, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Martin Luther King Jnr., Angela Davis and Aimé Césaire, to name a few, were becoming household names. Black communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were defining ‘self’ from their own perspective but in many cases, this process of defining ‘self’ was fraught with psychological problems as the colonising powers had seduced black people to believe everything African was ‘primitive and backward’. Determining ‘self’ created a crisis of identity, which still lingers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That belief has directly impacted African dance development in the Caribbean and in the UK. Through political, religious, spiritual and cultural re-orientation, large black communities began redefining ‘self’ and music and dance, once again, became integral components within the movements for justice. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century significant

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<sup>47</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, September 7 1917, p.6.

<sup>48</sup> For discussions on misinformation about of slavery and the black communities, see, for example, Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1972); *From Columbus to*

sections of young blacks began embracing the Rastafarian's lifestyle and ideology. This universal movement, towards a new definition of 'self' had its detractors, as those who had benefited from the coloniser's regime (mainly the lighter skinned 'coloureds', mulattoes and educated blacks) were not prepared to surrender their gains. Yet now, there was a distinct new phase in black cultural development.

In the Caribbean Jacques Compton suggested that the interest in Africa by people from the Caribbean significantly manifested itself in a two-fold manner on metaphysical and political levels. According to him,

The slaves in the West Indies had answered that question (identity) long ago. To have turned their backs on Africa, to have given up the old gods altogether would have meant instant metaphysical as well as psychological death in the New World of disruption, chaos, slavery and violence in which they had found themselves. In order to have lived through that experience they had to hold on to something substantial, and that something was their Africaness, their Negritude, so to speak. Above all they needed to hold on to, and to keep alive, their memories of Africa, an Africa to which they always longed to return.<sup>49</sup>

For the majority of slaves in the lowest societal ranks the question of identity was not of paramount importance as survival was the 'constant' in their lives. *They knew they were Africans* through the practice of their cultural traditions. Compton, however, glossed over too easily the ramifications and psychological damage that were done during four hundred years of slavery. To connect and positively identify an acceptance of 'self' as an African was not a foregone conclusion. The reality did not conform to a natural path from slavery to fully-fledged African citizen in the Caribbean and there were many who rejected, through political, religious and social pressures, their 'Negritude'. The African cultural revolution and renaissance found root, not in the decision-making higher strata of society, but amongst the majority of the deprived black communities. At that

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*Castro The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1997) and John Henrik Clarke, *Christopher Columbus and the Afrikan Holocaust*, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Compton, 'Africa in the West Indian Consciousness' in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, ed. by Brian Gates (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1980), pp.26-37 (p.27).



particular time in history, Africa itself was not in a position to help promote its own cultural heritage thus the voices of Africa in the Caribbean were both muted and disregarded. The search for 'self' and 'self-worth', for the vast majority of the population found no solace but Africans in the Caribbean articulated their feelings and expressed their emotional and spiritual needs orally and in music and dance.

African culture and black people were maintained at the margins of the new societies and in Jamaica, Wycliffe Bennett wrote that

Historically, privilege was synonymous with being white, or being able to pass for white, and often corresponded to a colour or shade scale ranging from white down to black; so that if you were black or obviously coloured, unless by some unlikely fortune you were rich, you were *ipso facto* underprivileged. Where opportunities could be based upon education, difficulties would continue to be created, unless the literate part of the population could be exposed to the same acceptable *speech training*.<sup>50</sup> [My italics]

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and several other organisations developed programmes to support the more disadvantaged sections of Jamaican society to improve their language skills in order to become more socially and economically mobile. 'Elocution or verse-speaking contests' were organised and these lasted for over thirty years, incorporating towards the latter period, English and other literatures and the Jamaican dialect, the latter in recognition of the fact that the vast majority of the disenfranchised classes spoke the dialect and Louise Bennett had popularised the form into acceptance.

In religious practice, syncretic worship, a combination of African religious practice and Christianity, was widespread throughout the New World but did not replace traditional practice. Yoruba deities *Sango*, *Obatala* (Creator of Human Form) and *Ogun* (God of war) took pride of place in many of these new communities, reflecting the conscious

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<sup>50</sup> Wycliffe Bennett, 'The Jamaican Theatre', *Jamaica Journal*, vol. 8 nos. 2 & 3 (Summer 1974), 3-9 (p.7).

decision by its practitioners, to use those particular powerful deities as symbols of resistance to any form of subjugation. Today, the practice and power of the Yoruba belief system is very well grounded amongst large sections of the black communities in the diaspora.

In *The Sun and the Drum*, Leonard Barrett articulated his own feelings about his Africaness and sense of identity, acknowledging that his 'mixed' family background, especially in terms of their religious practice, triggered his personal quest in search of his cultural identity. According to Barrett

Even as a child I could feel a slight social and cultural conflict between my mother's relatives and my father's. All the members of the family on my mother's side were practising Christians, whereas those on my father's side shunned Christianity.....My father's relatives were all followers of the native Pukumina religion, which was a modified version of the African Kumina cult.<sup>51</sup>

Within the context of the wider Western hemisphere, Barrett added that

The impact of African traditional religion is to be found all over the New World. The survival of Vodun in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, Sango in Trinidad, and Candomble and Macumba in Brazil are examples of African religions that are living, dynamic experiences and expressions of Black peoples who are recipients of traditions that have their roots in ancestral Africa. Although four hundred years of living in the West has modified these experiences and expressions, the distinctive qualities, rites, and ceremonies of these religions are basically African<sup>52</sup>.

The African traditions and practices in the Caribbean have undoubtedly been affected by its removal from source, but they have outlasted slavery. That speaks volumes for the penetration and depth of the belief systems from Africa and for the determination and dedication of those who maintained *the practice*. African spirituality and cultural traditions thus continued in the Caribbean, accommodating and adapting to its new environment and finding alternative and new modes of expression. But the processes of

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<sup>51</sup> Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and The Drum African roots in Jamaican folk tradition* (New Hampshire, USA: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1979), p.12.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p.24.



slavery, colonisation and then emancipation have combined to torment the 'souls of black folks' in terms of their identity.

**(8) African Cultural Practice in the Caribbean - The Development of Music and Dance**

Inevitably, from the continent to the Caribbean, African music and dance suffered directly from the distancing from its source; yet to the practitioners of the dance forms, the African continuity was un-interrupted. In the English speaking Caribbean, the forms are generally referred to as 'African-retained', 'African-derived' or 'African-survived' dances. In a similar manner in Jamaica, dance forms with a European influence are referred to as 'European- derived' and forms with an amalgam of several nations, as 'Indigenous Creolised Dance Forms'.<sup>53</sup>

From the forced dancing on slave ships through to its re-emergence in the Caribbean, African dance had to accommodate and adapt. As its practice was guided by traditional religious belief systems, it nevertheless maintained its core values, its rhythmic patterns, its gestures and its external and internal nuances. That continuity has been underpinned by its functional usage throughout the last five hundred years and the spiritual belief systems of the black communities. Beryl McBurnie's *Talking Drums*<sup>54</sup> referred to the dynamic spirit and the practice of traditional dance forms from Africa. Implanted on new soils during periods of great human suffering, the practitioners of the Awassa and the Koromantee, the Bongo and the Macumba accepted other influences and re-presented the forms to satisfy the conditions in the new environment.

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<sup>53</sup> See Hilary S. Carty, *Folk Dances of Jamaica: An Insight* (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1988) for a study of the 'main' folk forms in Jamaica. Ms. Carty worked as the Dance Officer at the CAVE Arts Centre in Birmingham and is currently the Director of Performing Arts at Arts Council England.

<sup>54</sup> Follows in the next section.

## TALKING DRUMS

Drums!  
Do you hear them?  
Drums that will talk to you –  
Talking Drums  
Listen as they come across the plains,  
Like magic from the hills,  
Down the deep valleys,  
Bringing back a voice –  
A voice that speaks of Africa.

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Quickly –  
To Brazil,  
For the “Macumba”.

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Home again!  
Beneath frilly petticoats,  
The luring of aged folk  
Will swing you,  
The “Bele”.

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There are the dancers!  
They will speak to you of drums with  
a passion  
Hugging the earth with their feet

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No drums for Shouters!!  
But the steady beat,  
Of their rhythmic feet,  
And the pulse at its height,  
Will be their drums;  
Panting and pounding,  
Pounding and panting...

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Should you come with me to Surinam  
And up the river Saramacca  
To Sandi Gron  
There the Djukas bold and free  
Dance, the Awassa.

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Your body too,  
At times,  
Throbs,  
And pants,  
And pounds –  
When your tide is full...  
Those are your  
“TALKING DRUMS”.<sup>55</sup>

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Look!  
The Seketi,  
And Koromantee

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Come back to Trinidad at  
Carenage for “Pencow”.

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In the valley, Diego  
Martin-----“Limbo”  
And “Bongo” to enliven  
You at wakes

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<sup>55</sup> Beryl McBurnie, ‘Talking Drums’ in *Cradle of Caribbean Dance*, by Molly Ahye (Trinidad: Heritage Cultures Ltd., 1983), pp.149. Layout as per original.



Drums are to be found everywhere on the islands in the Caribbean and as Beryl McBurnie pointed out, they are the talking drums of Africa. They are still being used to call upon the gods and the ancestors and are ingrained in the social fabric of black culture. Nowhere in the Caribbean are the revival and re-interpretation of African dance and music forms more pronounced than in Jamaica and in Trinidad and Tobago, and, as will be illustrated in chapter three, it was largely through the efforts of immigrants from these islands, that African dance first appeared as a regular cultural activity in England.

## (9) JAMAICA

### (i) European Occupation, Resistance and Traditional African Cultural Practice

Although the Spanish arrived in Jamaica in 1494, the island was neglected until the arrival of the British in 1655. It remained a British colony until August 6<sup>th</sup> 1962. As Orlando Patterson in *The origins, development and structure of the Negro slave society in Jamaica* pointed out, as part of the recreational patterns of the slaves, music, dancing and plays were used “to break the routine of their harsh daily existence”.<sup>56</sup> Africans on Jamaican soil had successfully resisted their European oppressors for many years and an indication of that determined opposition was confirmed, when in 1739, the British had to sign a treaty with Cudjoe of the Maroons, allowing them “a level of autonomy and independence which was unthinkable for blacks in the 18<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>57</sup> Horace Campbell defined the four main terms of the treaty as

...the Maroons should govern themselves in their own communities in Moore Town, Nanny Town, Scotts Hall and Acompong Town; that the British should discontinue efforts to enslave Maroons; the right of the Maroons to hunt and fish unmolested and the continued ownership and occupation of Maroons lands.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An analysis of the origins, development and structure of Negro slave society in Jamaica* (Jamaica: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1973), p.231.

<sup>57</sup> Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (London: Hansib Publishing Ltd., 1985), p.21.

The treaty fluctuated, as both parties deviated from rigidly sticking to what was agreed, but nonetheless, it enabled the Africans to live and practice cultural traditions, as they would have done generations earlier. Tracy Nicholas pointed out that, “the Maroons continued to distress the English for more than forty years. During this time more than forty-four Acts of Assembly were passed and at least £240,000 expended for suppression of the Maroons”<sup>59</sup> and as a living testament to the courage and resistance of the Maroons,

To this day Jamaican Maroons continue to live in their mountain communities....are fiercely proud of having won a treaty from the British and have avoided most turnings toward modern civilization. In maintaining a world unto themselves, the Maroons are protecting their essentially unaltered African culture.<sup>60</sup>

Campbell comments that

The retention of African culture and religious expressions in Jamaica was enhanced by the continuous flow of new slaves to Jamaica. As a result, there were always a large proportion of slaves who remembered Africa, and these Africans commanded great respect, especially those with a knowledge of African medical practices and religious rites.<sup>61</sup>

Religious practice, as a form of social resistance, was a coherent theme throughout the Caribbean but there were other African practices, including witchcraft (*obeah*).

According to Dale Bisnauth, “after 1760, it became an offence punishable by death for slaves to practice *obeah* in Jamaica”<sup>62</sup> and

Since any aspect of African religion was likely to be described as *obeah* by those who administered the law in Jamaica, it meant that the practice of that religion was now under official ban. That ban extended across the British Caribbean, since the other islands followed Jamaica in legislating against *obeah*.<sup>63</sup>

Jamaica was the largest of the English-speaking Caribbean islands and therefore offered numerous opportunities for cultivation and mass production of sugar.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p.21.

<sup>59</sup> Tracy Nicholas, *Rastafari A Way of Life* (New York, USA: Anchor Books, 1979), p.10.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p.11.

<sup>61</sup> *op. cit.* p.23.

<sup>62</sup> Dale Bisnauth, *A History of Religions in the Caribbean* (Jamaica: Kingston Publishers Ltd, 1989), p.83.



The period of the slave trade to Jamaica lasted for nearly three hundred years, from approximately 1533 – 1807. At the end of this period, over 600,000 Africans, drawn from an area of approximately 5,000 miles, starting in the northwest in Senegal, and extending as far south as Angola, were transported to Jamaica, then the largest single importer of African slave labour in all of the British Colonies in the New World.<sup>64</sup>

As Jamaica accommodated thousands of slaves it was inevitable that African cultural practice would be more developed there than in most of the other smaller islands in the Caribbean.

Slaves used holidays to cultivate provision grounds, to exchange their goods and more importantly, to celebrate. Towns such as Kingston, Spanish Town, Falmouth and Black River were the focus of these celebrations.....

Festivals were heavily influenced by African practices. This was very clear from the form they took, the instruments used and in the dress of the slaves themselves.<sup>65</sup>

There was a constant influx of Africans into Jamaica and there is evidence to suggest that this continued after the abolition of slavery. H. P Jacobs noted that the entry of ‘free’ Africans into Jamaican society after 1834 numbered over 7,500 and suggested that the numbers, more realistically up to 1861, could have been nearer to 11,000.<sup>66</sup>

According to Jacobs those free Africans opted to live away from their places of employment and chose to live amongst fellow Africans, “thus when the new Jamaicans set out to establish free villages and a new life, they were not only withdrawing from un-rewarded labour, but were launching the movement to promote a more meaningful community life”.<sup>67</sup> This new source of labour would have been an oasis for the continuance of African culture practice.

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p.83-84.

<sup>64</sup> *Freedom To Be*, op. cit. p.3.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p.21-22.

<sup>66</sup> See H.P Jacobs, ‘The Last Africans: A Review Article’, *Jamaica Journal*, vol.8 no.4 (December 1974), 32-35.

<sup>67</sup> *Freedom To Be*, op. cit. p.54-55.

Although Africans significantly outnumbered all other ethnic groups on the island, in Jamaica today

On this seemingly paradisaical island, .....5 per cent of the population predominantly the white establishment owns 90 per cent of the wealth.

Dividing lines on the island are very clear- they are determined by class and color. Except under certain circumstances, in Jamaica black-skinned people comprise the lowest class. Brown-skinned people may subsist at a slightly higher level, while light-skinned people find their way to the middle and upper classes – the “good life” – with comparative ease. But nothing in Jamaica insures success so easily as being white – and the closer a person is, both in coloration and manner, to being white, the better is his or her chance for success.<sup>68</sup>

European values became rooted amongst the affluent sections of Jamaican society and Marcus Garvey’s philosophy of ‘Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad’ took root amongst large sections of the disenfranchised, including the Rastafarians. The overt influence of the Rastafarian Movement has peaked but its symbolism as a force to unite blacks in the West to their ancestral home in Africa remains deep-rooted. As cultural and intellectual exchanges became more commonplace, ‘Garveyism’ and ‘Rastafarianism’ gained a foothold amongst larger sections of the black communities throughout the diaspora, as black people continued to define themselves in ‘their own image’. Today the visibility and presence of Africa in Jamaica is unmistakable but for many, the allegiances and cultural and political deference to Europe and the West remain a thorny, unresolved issue.

## (ii) Dance in Jamaican Society

In communities throughout Jamaica, black people were stepping into foot-holes created and left by their African ancestors. They danced the *Kumina*, enjoyed the spiritual upliftment in *Revivalism* and celebrated socially in *Pitchy Patchy* and *Jonkunnu*. Africa still finds an outlet and

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<sup>68</sup> Tracy Nicholas, op. cit. p.18.



In Westmoreland, Yoruba descendants today still mark death, birth and marriage by Nago dancing and music, performed at ‘setups’ on the ninth and fortieth nights after death.<sup>69</sup>

This theme of African continuity was reinforced by Barrett who reported that

Today the strongest evidence of Myalism exists in the Goumbay dance ritual, which is performed in and around the Maroon communities of Scotts Hall and Accompong for healing purposes and incorporates the use of herbs, spirit possession and ancestral worship.<sup>70</sup>

In the traditional forms, Imogene Kennedy (Queenie) has been the leading practitioner of *Kumina* in Jamaica and has advised the Jamaican National Dance Theatre Company (JNDTC) and Olive Lewin’s Jamaican Folk Singers in the understanding and promotion of this particular aspect of dance and songs, from the African continent, for the theatre. ‘Queenie’s’ knowledge came through the teachings of her grandparents, her observations as a child at *Kumina bands* and through a period of “spiritual experience at the cotton-tree root”<sup>71</sup> but blacks generally, maintained, re-constituted and re-presented African cultural traditions through practice.

Following independence, there were new makers of popular culture in Jamaica.

Perhaps the most radical change has been the development of the Dance – the work of Hazel Johnson has led to the formation of many dance groups, and Ivy Baxter, Eddie Thomas and Rex Nettleford have brought a new social and theatrical significance with Creative Dance, and the work of The National Dance Theatre Company seems to have enormous potential.<sup>72</sup>

Today, in the wider Jamaican society, African, indigenous creolised, European, modern and ballet forms of dance thrive at all levels; these also include the popular social dances derived from reggae music.

Theatre was developing along the European model until Jamaicans took the initiative and re-orientated it in a new direction. Henry Fowler observed that along with the dance

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<sup>69</sup> *Freedom To Be*, op. cit. p.56.

<sup>70</sup> Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum*, op. cit. p.54-55.

explosion, Jamaicans wanted to express their own identity by clearly demarcating who they were and that journey was crystallized in the doyen of Jamaican words, Louise Bennett. According to Fowler, “like the dancers, she brings a new dimension to the theatre embodying folklore and folk music, and a personality that typifies the spirit of Jamaica to which audiences spontaneously respond”.<sup>73</sup> Bennett, like Garvey, had a growing audience and was initially appealing to and energising a certain section of black Jamaican society to empower themselves and understand their identities within a new society. For Bennett, using Jamaican *patois* and being proud of it was a step towards reclaiming some of the traditional values that were being gradually marginalized. Errol Hill also saw the development of a Caribbean theatre as essential to the emerging independent nation states in the Caribbean and explored how some of the tangible issues could be tackled to realise the vision. For him an informed audience was a necessity.

We have stated that the audience is a contributory factor in the creation of dramatic art, but this presupposes an informed and sensitive audience, an audience willing to look with discernment, with a capacity for using its intellect and engaging its emotions. I would not for a moment suggest that any theatrical movement anywhere in the world has ever been fortunate enough to have an ideal audience but I do contend that without an audience possessing a modicum of interest and understanding to join in the creative adventure of the theatre, and an audience too of sufficient numbers to support a fairly continuous round of theatrical activity, no drama of any significance has ever been or ever will be produced.<sup>74</sup>

Hill’s ‘ideal audience’ for drama in the Caribbean was not to be found amongst the vast majority of the black population then, but interest in local dialects, debates about ‘self-governance’ issues and increased activities in the other performing arts, notably dance, began to lay a foundation for an informed theatre audience. Music, dance and the ‘oral

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<sup>71</sup> Maureen Warner Lewis, *The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina*, Pamphlet No. 3 Savacou Publications Mona 1977pp 57-78, p.61-62.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Fowler, ‘A history of Theatre in Jamaica’, *Jamaica Journal*, (March 1968), 53-59 (p.58).

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* p.58.

<sup>74</sup> Errol Hill, ‘West Indian Drama’ in *The Artist in West Indian Society: a symposium*, ed. by Errol Hill (Jamaica: Dept. of Extra Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, 1963), pp. 7-24 (p.9-10).



tradition' became the conduit for cultural revival and community identification. The performance arts began to change to reflect the new Jamaica and as Fowler noted, the new performers "are developing one of the valid answers to the *emotional needs* of the new Jamaican theatrical public, and a vastly increased public it has become".<sup>75</sup> [My italics]

The literature on dance, folklore and other aspects of African traditions in Jamaica has been steadily growing and Edward Kamau Brathwaite suggested that "white Creoles ..contributed very little...to spiritual life"<sup>76</sup> and that it was

the ex-African slaves and Creole blacks in the Caribbean (who) began from their first landings to adapt their African heritage to the new and changed conditions. As time went on, certain European customs and forms, inevitably, were incorporated into their evolving 'little' or 'folk' tradition; but it is an inaccurate and unwarranted assumption to claim, as is popularly and academically done in the West Indies, that this was a European orientated adaptation. For one thing, in the English islands at any rate, there was very little 'European' to adapt to.<sup>77</sup>

Brathwaite's assertion underscores the central tenets of this work, inasmuch that there were accommodation and adaptations in the practice of traditional African dances in the Caribbean but in many cases, European impact was minimal. As African practice was entrenched amongst the poor blacks, the African contribution remained pegged to that lower societal rung.

While African traditions, which were derived from the cultural back-ground of the blacks remained strong, especially in the rural areas, there was no official recognition and the folk culture, although representative of the majority, was regarded as a sub-culture.<sup>78</sup>

Cheryl Ryman in her article *The Jamaican Heritage in Dance* pointed out that at several levels in Jamaican society, African cultural traditions were devalued. According to Ryman,

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* p.58.

<sup>76</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (London and Port of Spain, Trinidad: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1981), p.6.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p.6.

At all levels in society we need to reassess our attitudes to the agents of our heritage. The tendency to consider and treat many of our traditional forms (primarily of African origin) carelessly and with a display of “foreign” ignorance, is all too prevalent, even in some government agencies, especially those responsible for the visual medium. The effect of these attitudes has been to produce fleeting thrills and nearly permanent damage to the viewer’s perception of their African heritage. Individuals or groups in positions of influence, such as teachers and theatrical producers, may be as culpable as their government counterparts.<sup>79</sup>

Ryman’s critical observations were extremely poignant in reminding ‘government agencies’ and others of the necessary and critical role they have in reassessing European reportage of their ancestors’ contributions, in order to recreate a history of truth. In a direct sense, she was posing the question, ‘who are we’ and suggested that many of the answers would be much clearer through a better understanding of the folk dances of the nation. She detailed the dances of Jamaica, grouping them together by (a) ‘core’ types and (b) ‘core’ areas. Her work showed that there were numerous dance forms, which were of definite African ‘sources’ in both the sacred and secular tabulations. The *Puk-kumina*<sup>80</sup>, for example, “has provided material for the National Dance Theatre Company”<sup>81</sup> reflecting not only the African presence on the island but the impact of traditional religious forms in the social life of the nation. As Rex Nettleford, artistic director of the JNDTC, endorsed, “religion is something central to Jamaican existence. The JNDTC repertoire responds naturally. *Pocomania*, a Jamaican folk worship, is danced not as a send –up of subculture cultism but as a serious experience”.<sup>82</sup>

The JNDTC also has within its repertoire, the *Kumina* and as Leonard Barrett, pointed out, “*Kumina*, then, is not just a dance, but a serious ceremony through which the

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<sup>78</sup> *Freedom To Be*, op. cit. p.63.

<sup>79</sup> Cheryl Ryman, ‘The Jamaican Heritage in Dance: Developing a traditional typology’, *Jamaica Journal*, no.44 (June 1980), 2-14 (p.3).

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p.5. Revival, according to Ryman is ‘the 1860-61 religious phenomenon which gave rise to two main branches – Zion of a more Euro-Christian orientation and Puk-kumina which retained or revitalised strong African elements following the 1860 Euro-Christian explosion among the Black population.’

<sup>81</sup> Harold Turner, in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, op. cit. p.52.

<sup>82</sup> Rex Nettleford and Maria LaYacona, *Roots and Rhythms: Jamaica’s National Dance Theatre* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), p.34.



ancestors are communicated with and by which hidden things are revealed”.<sup>83</sup> He continued

*Kumina* is an African derived religion in which music, dance and possession by the spirit of dead ancestors play a vital role....The influence of the Bakongo people of what was then part of Central Africa, present day Zaire, is strong in language used in worship and in many elements of their belief. Elements of earlier Myal are also strong.<sup>84</sup>

In *Folk Dances of Jamaica*, Hilary Carty illustrates how three critical factors of ‘occupation, importation and colonisation’ affected the cultural patterns not just of Jamaica but also of the Caribbean as a whole. In discussing the *Kumina*, Carty re-stated the critical points made by Rex Nettleford about the dance.

Firstly, the motions and positions used in the dance, are *exclusively African* in style and stance, incorporating a version of what has now been termed the ‘Congo Step’. Secondly, in terms of linguistics, authentic African words spoken by the dancers can be distinguished at *Kumina* rituals. These words, as with much of the *Kumina* tradition, have been passed on verbally from generation to generation. Thirdly, the paraphernalia or mediums used at a ritual – e.g. rum, water and animal sacrifice – have direct links with African ritualistic practices. Also, the music created in *Kumina* rituals has been traced back to Africa and similarities of form and content have been noted even today.<sup>85</sup> [My italics]

The *Kumina* has adapted to its new environment whilst maintaining the core essences of the original, including vocabulary, and thus can be classified as African Dance in the Diaspora (ADD- Jamaica). Labelling the dance as an African-derived dance, especially as it became more practiced following emancipation, with free Africans in Jamaica, tends to imply that the form is without much of its original content. Equally, the suffixing of it, psychologically, serves to maintain a barrier between people from the African continent and blacks in the diaspora. According to Sheila Barnett

It is believed that *Kumina* arrived in Jamaica when emancipation was announced and therefore by the time the slaves arrived in Jamaica they were free and thus able to practice their dance traditions. It is mostly found in St. Thomas.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum*, op. cit. p.27.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.* p.56.

<sup>85</sup> Hilary Carty, op. cit. p.20.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Sheila Barnett, Birmingham 5 August 1987. Barnett, like many other dancers and researchers in Jamaica believe that the forms arrived in Jamaica after emancipation, around 1840. In a lecture by Franklin Smith (research history student, England) on 12 August 2001 at the Voice Box on the South Bank Centre, he indicated that the *Kumina* arrived in the West Indies around 1790 and not 1840.

Billy Lawrence, a highly skilled Jamaican traditional drummer, pointed out “there are two types of drum in the *Kumina*. The bandu and the cattah. The bandu keeps the basic rhythm and controls the dancers movement and is used to call the spirits to come and join in. Sometimes on stage, believe me, there is spirit possession”.<sup>87</sup> The *Kumina* is danced in a circle with dancers ‘inching’ around in an anticlockwise direction.

According to Carty

It is a core type of African retentions and as such serves the dual purposes of (i) providing clues as to the lives and the religious and social practices of our African ancestors; and (ii) reaffirming the complexity and highly developed state of the African religious and cultural practices – necessary for them to have survived in such a pure form through colonisation, creolisation and in many ways mere toleration by its own descendants, Jamaicans today.<sup>88</sup>

Jamaica today has a growing number of dancers, academics and choreographers who have responded to the challenges and accepted the batons of revaluing traditional African dance practice on the island. In tandem with the JNDTC, Patsy Ricketts, L’Antonette Staines, Stella Marris Dance Company and others are researching and creating dance that reflects their African heritage; sacred and secular dances choreographed with sensitivity and ‘African’ sensibilities for the Western stage.

According to L’Antonette Staines

I educate through my dance. My audience must always leave having learned something about the history and culture of the Caribbean that is directly linked to Afrika. Dance has to be more than pretty costumes and people moving around stage.

I am a Yoruba priestess, initiated 17 years ago in Nigeria. My first understanding of spirituality came through *Kumina* and Rastafari in Jamaica. It was Rastafari that led me to the Yoruba religion and I still have a deep respect for the cultural upliftment that the movement provides through reggae and other word sounds. In my dance, there are whole sections on the Yoruba religion dedicated to the Orishas (deities). I connect with the Orishas, prayer, meditation and the ancestors for the work to come through me as a choreographer. Everything comes through a spiritual space manifested on the dance floor.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Billy Lawrence, Birmingham 5 August 1987.

<sup>88</sup> op. cit. p.22. For more details regarding the position and movements of the *Kumina*, see especially pages 22-31.



In several interviews and discussions with Patsy Ricketts and L'Antonette Staines over the past few years, it became apparent that both create dance and choreograph work for the stage from an African perspective driven by a powerful, spiritual energy. Their lifestyles embrace and openly reflect those fundamental values of African religious and cultural traditions and their practices are underpinned and informed by these.

As dancers have gravitated towards their African sources for inspiration, Jamaican reggae music, which has a foundation in traditional African religions, has added value towards re-appraising the written, historical version of their ancestors. The penetrating lyrics of popular artistes Bob Marley, Culture, and Jimmy Cliff, to name a few, are frequently used in choreography as they openly speak to the issues of identity, identification and African culture in Jamaica and allow dancers to use their bodies, without inhibitions, to articulate their sense of 'self'.

## **(10) Trinidad and Tobago**

### **(i) Forging an Identity**

Unlike Jamaica, the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago received slaves quite late in the trafficking of human bodies and also, after emancipation, invited a substantial amount of East Indian indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations. The nation's motto since independence on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1962, 'Together we aspire, Together we achieve', suggests that the 'we' was representative of the diverse and culturally different ethnic groups on the islands but aspirations and achievements were very different for the different communities for many years.

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<sup>89</sup> AB & C, 'L'Acadco Caribbean Dance Force', *Afrikan Business Culture*, Nu Millennium Issue (n.d), p.9. Interview by AB & C in London.

Like Jamaica, there was a very vibrant black community, prior to and post independence and the symbolisms and rituals of Africa were pronounced. In *The African Presence in Trinidad and Tobago*,<sup>90</sup> the depth and penetration of African cultural practice was explored and it showed that many local practitioners of the Yoruba religion, as well as the members of the Spiritual Baptists and other African faith systems, travel to the continent and to other Caribbean countries, consolidating their traditional African religious practices and networking into systems to improve their understanding and practice of their traditional forms. Besides *Sango*, *Ogun* and *Obatala*, ‘traditionalists’ acknowledge and call upon *Dambala*, *Shakpona*, *Egungun* and several other lesser deities, who still play critical roles in their lives and in the lives of many whom they serve. J.D. Elder suggests that during 1808 – 1815 the numbers of slaves varied between 21,895 – 25, 871<sup>91</sup> but by 1960, the numbers of ‘Negroes’ had increased significantly.

**TABLE 3**  
**Trinidad and Tobago Population 1960<sup>92</sup>**

RACE	MALE	FEMALE
Negro	176,380	182,208
White	7,873	7,845
East Indian	153,043	148,903
Chinese	4,709	3,652
Lebanese, Syrians	824	766
Mixed	65,178	69,571
Other	3,404	3,310
Race not stated	169	122
Total	411,580	416,377

<sup>90</sup> Trinidad & Tobago Television (TTT), ‘The African Presence in Trinidad and Tobago. A look at Cultural Continuity and Change’. TTT, 1982-1983.  
A series of six programmes identifying the variety of African religious practices and rituals that are found in Trinidad and Tobago. The programmes included debates and discussions and covered the Second Orisha conference in Bahia, Brazil. Followers of Sango, Voodoo, Spiritual Baptists and others shared experiences, exchanged ideas and fostered networks to support the growth of the Yoruba faith around the world.

<sup>91</sup> J.D. Elder, *From Congo drum to Steelband* (Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1969), p.5.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.* p.7.



In terms of the cultural contribution by Africans, Elder pointed out some major inputs into the musical agenda and these he identified as coming from African descendants of Yorubas, Congos, Radas, Mandingoes, Hausas and “a few Ashanti”. The practitioners of *Sango*<sup>93</sup> were marginalized but in spite of the persecution, *Sango* was regularly practised throughout the twin-island state.

In its early development in Trinidad, *Sango* combined African religious ideas with those of Catholicism. While the African ideas predominated in the formation of vodun were Dahomean in origin, those that were most influential in the development of *Sango* were of Yoruba origin.<sup>94</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s the Spiritual Baptists were negated and frowned upon by the vast majority of the public, as those expressions of an African identity appeared to be out of synchronisation within the leading political, religious and social movements, pre- and post- independence. Notwithstanding the issues of identity, African religious practices, which were ridiculed and banned for several years re-surfaced in a more formal and re-structured manner. Patricia Stephens, a Spiritual Baptist, pointed out that

The Spiritual Baptist Faith that emerged was a dynamic collision of African and Caribbean culture. One of the main characteristics of the movement is that it acted as an agent for mobilising the dispossessed into accepting the positive aspects of their origin.<sup>95</sup>

In spite of the late arrival of Africans on this island, they very quickly established religious communities for themselves and Andrew Carr, Christopher Starr, and Olga J. Mavrogordato amongst others, reported on the beliefs and lifestyles of the African communities in Belmont during the nineteenth century. According to Mavrogordato

Along the Belmont Valley Road, in about 1890, could be found the African settlements of Rada, Mandingo, Ibo and Congo families. The Rada Compound was, and still is, the centre of their social lives. There, the leading groups of Africans and their descendents met to carry out their religious cult, handed down

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<sup>93</sup> The practice of Sango, worshipping of the Yoruba God of thunder, took place regularly in the village of Claxton Bay where I lived and as a young boy. I often attended these Sango events to witness the drumming and dancing. My prompt (panic stricken!) departure from these fascinating rituals was always at the point of the blood sacrifice.

<sup>94</sup> Dale Bisnauth, op. cit. p.171-172.

<sup>95</sup> Rev Patricia Stephens, *The Spiritual Baptist Faith: African New World Religious History, Identity & Testimony* (London: Karnak House, 1999), p.19.

by their forefathers. Rada is the term used to denote a native of the French West African Protectorate of Dahomey.<sup>96</sup>

Carr noted that the leadership of the Rada community came directly from Dahomey (Benin) and Abojevi Zahwenu, who later changed his name to Robert Antoine in Trinidad, was the first leader (hubono) of the sect. They worshipped in their accustomed African manner, drummed and danced, prepared traditional meals and offered live sacrifices. The Rada community maintained a high degree of purity in their African religious worship and 'the community' still exists in Trinidad today.<sup>97</sup> This identification with, and acceptance of, Africa as a immediate and tangible part of the 'soul' of the islander, found roots in some sections of society as Africans were keen to trace their genealogy.

In Trinidad you had Mandingo communities, you had Yoruba communities, Hausa communities, Congo communities; a Rada community in Belmont was still alive and well in the 1950s. It was communities like these, creatively applying their African cultural heritage to a new environment, that gave us calypso and steelband.<sup>98</sup>

## (ii) African Dance in Trinidad and Tobago

According to John Cowley, "proselytising Christian missionaries saw drum dances as sacrilegious and tried to stamp them out. The drum symbolised not only 'uncivilised' Africa, but also violent disorder and the work of the devil".<sup>99</sup> Those sentiments were totally imbued by the Trinidadian ruling classes but it was Beryl McBurnie who initially battled against the system to ensure inclusion of the traditional dances of Africa into the psyche of the people of the twin-island state. According to McBurnie

The most significant element in West Indian dance is the African. African forms of dance persisted despite constant attempts to suppress them by the ruling class as a means of breaking the spirit of the slaves. Secrecy had therefore to attend

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<sup>96</sup> Olga J. Mavrogordato, *Voices in the Street* (Trinidad: Inprint Caribbean Ltd., 1979), p.113.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Antoine's son, Sedley C Antoine, the fourth hubono of the group, died on April 9 2001, fifty three years after becoming the chief of the Rada community in Belmont.

<sup>98</sup> Tony Martin, op. cit. p.16.

<sup>99</sup> John Cowley, *Carnival Canboulay and Calypso Traditions in the making* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1996), p.6.



gatherings for dance and song, and the burning of canes, - “cannes brulees” – was one way of signalling a clandestine meeting. Rituals like the Shango, Rada, Shouters, Plavoodoo, are still practiced in the Belmont and Lavantille Hills, in Tacarigua, El Dorado, and elsewhere by those who claim the heritage of the Yorubas, Ibos and Dahomeyans originally from Africa’s west coast.<sup>100</sup>

Later, Molly Ahye in her seminal work on dance in Trinidad and Tobago challenged the system and its marginalisation of African dance forms. Ahye categorised African dances under the following broad headings, although this early method of recording is now somewhat limited in its scope. She broadly categorised the dances into seven groups as dances in worship (which included Yoruba Sango), Funerary Dances (which included Bongo), Tobago Reel, Tobago Jig, Big Drum (“Nation Dances” including Koromantee and Congo), Limbo and Kalinda. According to Ahye,

....one would be amazed to find segments of the rituals, as practised today, corresponding identically to present practices in such places as Brazil, Haiti, Cuba and Nigeria, its source. In spite of the fact that a great deal has been forgotten, research has revealed that some of the rites that have disappeared in Nigeria are still performed in our part of the world. This should cause no real surprise when one considers that, especially for the Africans in Trinidad and Tobago, there was hardly if any contact with the Fatherland for centuries. Naturally then, they preserved what they remembered as they knew no other.<sup>101</sup>

African dance in Trinidad and Tobago was not about the preservation of the form (for in relying on preservation alone, the African cultural heritage would have been choked out of the slaves over time) but about *its practice and the emotional and spiritual nurturing which sustained black life on the islands*. African culture in Trinidad and Tobago was not allowed to fossilise; it evolved under the watchful eyes of the ruling class, of all shades of colour, but maintained its core essences through practice. Because of black spirituality, rituals and the relationship of man within his environment, dance flourished.

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<sup>100</sup> Beryl McBurnie, ‘West Indian Dance’ in *The Artist in West Indian Society: a symposium*, ed. by Errol Hill (Jamaica: Dept of Extra Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, 1963), pp. 51–54 (p.52).

<sup>101</sup> Molly Ahye, *Golden Heritage: The Dance in Trinidad and Tobago* (Trinidad: Heritage Cultures Ltd., 1978), p.73.

Ahye's exposition about the purity of the form in Trinidad and other parts of the Americas have been strengthened over the recent years through the exchange of scholarship particularly between Trinidad and Tobago and Nigeria. Orisha seminars and conferences and traditional practise are now openly promoted and supported and the latter practiced in many Caribbean islands. Ahye and others have been contributing to this new dynamics in the practice of African religion throughout the diaspora.

In a series of television programmes produced by Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT)<sup>102</sup> during the early eighties, the history of the African presence on the islands was explored through religion and rituals. Clearly articulating and acknowledging the direct links between Africa, especially Nigeria, and the twin-island state, Neville Linton amplified how cultural transmissions were directly linked to political power and suggested that if Africa was in a position during slavery to have also maintained and developed links with the Caribbean, there would have been no debate today about the cultural identity of the Africans on the islands. He cited, for example, how India offered scholarships and other financial support to Indian cultural groups in the Caribbean in order to help build and strengthen their ties with India. In the case of Africa, these links are a recent phenomenon. However, the anthropologist J.D. Elder maintained "that blacks were able to retain major features of traditional African religion, especially of Nigeria"<sup>103</sup> and hence the deities of the Yoruba religion are deeply integrated into the fabric and belief systems of many black communities in the Trinidad and Tobago. Those beliefs have had an enormous influence on the shaping of the islands' culture and in the defining of dance practise.

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<sup>102</sup> op. cit. Trinidad & Tobago Television (TTT), 'The African Presence in Trinidad and Tobago. A look at Cultural Continuity and Change'. TTT, 1982-1983.

<sup>103</sup> ibid. Programme 2, 'African Presence in Trinidad and Tobago. A look at Cultural Continuity and Change'. TTT, 1982.



Africa stamped itself in Trinidad and Tobago through a variety of routes and C.R.Ottley<sup>104</sup> discussed one such point of contact in *Folk Beliefs and Folk Customs*. Maureen Warner-Lewis unearthed the connection via Yoruba language and customs in Trinidad, in exploring the religious links between Africa and the islands but noted that “although officially Christian, the polytheistic Yoruba, Rada, and Congo retained several of their traditional religious rites. In all of these, drumming with or without dancing was of focal importance”.<sup>105</sup>

The transition however from surreptitious religious practices during the period of and following slavery, to public stage performances of African cultures initially created problems within Trinidadian society. Commonplace during British occupation were advertisements, articles and reviews of Grand Balls and dances<sup>106</sup> and the controlling political and social hierarchies introduced classical ballet as the form of dance best suited to the islands. As Ahye, in *Cradle of Caribbean Dance* reported, the media afforded ‘white’ visiting artistes and locals from the upper echelons prime coverage regardless of the substance, quality or relevance of their work, but

In looking now at the other side of the scale where coloured artistes were in focus as performers during the period, we return to the group left by Beryl McBurnie. While ample coverage was given to the work of the Creole upper and middle class artists, very little was done to promote the work of the others.<sup>107</sup>

The ‘others’ referring to the blacker sections of the local society, who either through the blackness of their skin colour or their pursuance of African dance goals did not reflect a

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<sup>104</sup> C.R. Ottley, *Folk Beliefs; Folk Customs; and Folk Characters found in Trinidad and Tobago* (Trinidad: Crusoe Publications, 1979). Ottley conducted oral research looking at social customs and behaviours of people of African descent on the twin islands, showing the similarities to the beliefs and practices of Africans on the continent.

<sup>105</sup> Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Guinea's Other Suns: The African Dynamic in Trinidad Culture* (Massachusetts, USA: The Majority Press, 1991), p.49.

<sup>106</sup> See for example the *Trinidad Sentinel*, Vol. II No. 8, Port of Spain, Monday October 3, 1864 in its promotion of the Grand Ball for the arrival of the new Governor of the island.

Also the *Trinidad Guardian*, from its first publication on Sunday September 2, 1917 promoting various dances by the Violet Club, The Phoenix Dancing Club etc.

<sup>107</sup> Molly Ahye, *Cradle of Caribbean Dance* (Trinidad: Heritage Cultures Ltd., 1983), p.12.

fraternisation with Britain and were therefore invisible in the press. Beryl McBurnie<sup>108</sup> was a pioneer in the dance movement in Trinidad and Tobago and has been recognised as one of the three leading *grande dames* of dance in the Caribbean.<sup>109</sup> Her contribution to dance development in Trinidad and Tobago is, even up to this day, unparalleled. In the transition period pre- and post-political independence, the whole notion of identity and cultural development was in a state of flux. McBurnie worked with Andrew Carr, Boscoe Holder, Olive Walker and many others campaigned to secure a ‘proper’ cultural space for African dance and music forms that were being practised on the islands. McBurnie used traditional dance forms to help shape the ‘identity of the island’, to help build confidence in young people wishing to express their cultural heritage and to instil pride in a growing nation of predominantly black people. Searching for ‘new’ artistic inspiration pre-occupied the elite of society and new thinking, new personnel and new ideas (generally from a British viewpoint) were all jostling for prime position. African dance, not for the first time, was being marginalised. In 1982, Beryl McBurnie was unceremoniously toppled from her post at the Little Carib Theatre. In responding to critics about her dismissal, McBurnie quizzed, “could Beryl McBurnie go to Belfast or Dublin and change the direction of their indigenous theatre”?<sup>110</sup> In *What in Dreams we do – the Times of Beryl McBurnie*, Burton Sankeralli argued cogently against the rationale for the dismissal of McBurnie and at the same time was questioning the elite about their lack of understanding for traditional African music, dance and creative cultural practices on the island. According to Sankeralli

The phrase “folk dance” is often thrown around very casually in connection with the life and work of Beryl McBurnie, but her true priority was genuinely metaphysical which is to say spiritual. Hence it is unsurprising that in her later

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<sup>108</sup> Molly Ahye’s *Cradle of Caribbean Dance* is the history of Beryl McBurnie’s dance company, Little Carib. It provides a useful insight to dance development in Trinidad and Tobago and includes a collection of reviews, photographs, comments by leading politicians and other key players in the arts arena in Trinidad from the forties.

<sup>109</sup> The other two *grande dames* being Ivy Baxter of Jamaica and Lavinia Williams of Jamaica/Haiti.

<sup>110</sup> Molly Ahye, *Cradle of Caribbean Dance* op. cit. p.115. Beryl McBurnie was replaced at the top of the Little Carib Theatre, which she had so fought to establish as a theatre for folk dance. She was replaced by Helen Camps from Ireland, but who was a resident of Trinidad.



years she turned increasingly to the Orisha, the living patterns of music that was always Beryl's primal concern. For Beryl this primal source was the dance of the people by which they are vitally sustained, by which they affirm "self", by which they struggle for freedom.<sup>111</sup>

African religious dance was impacting the secular art forms and dance companies searched for 'material' that was both inspirational and of relevance to their practice. In 1955, the Little Carib Theatre presented *Sango*, the Yoruba divinity of thunder and lightning, and that was followed by several other productions focusing on the African content on the island. Molly Ahye's 'New Dance Group' performed *The Sacred Horsemen*<sup>112</sup> in 1970 commenting through music and movement of the inclusivity and community participation of African voodoo worship. The traditional forms practiced in the Caribbean have had an 'ADD' factor (vibrancy) but direct parallels today between Yoruba practice in Nigeria and, for example, *Sango* in Trinidad and Tobago and *Voodoo* in Haiti point unequivocally to almost identical practice between the islands and the continent. As Molly Ahye recalled after visiting Nigeria

Going back to Nigeria you can see the origins of the dances in the Diaspora....As a matter of fact, I can say without contradiction that in our part of the world, I find that some of the practices are more vibrant than in Nigeria itself.<sup>113</sup>

J.D. Elder points out that cultural retentions from Africa are most pronounced in the "religious practices which one finds among the blacks in Trinidad".<sup>114</sup> Neville Linton, in the TTT series noted that, "religion travels through power – the power of the State"<sup>115</sup> and he bemoaned the fact that the University of the West Indies, up to twenty years ago,

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<sup>111</sup> Burton Sankeralli, 'What in Dreams we do – The Times of Beryl McBurnie'. Taken from information available on [www.trinidad-tobago.net/article.aspx](http://www.trinidad-tobago.net/article.aspx).

<sup>112</sup> 'The Sacred Horseman' based on the Voudou, the Rada rites from Haiti.

<sup>113</sup> Molly Ahye in the TTT series, 'The African Presence in Trinidad & Tobago: A look at cultural continuity and change in Religion'. Programme 2, 1982.

<sup>114</sup> Dr. J. D Elder in the TTT series, 'The African Presence in Trinidad & Tobago: A look at cultural continuity and change in Religion'. Programme 2, 1982.

He indicated that blacks were able to retain major features of traditional African religious practice, especially from Nigeria and that these are flourishing in Trinidad today. He added that Christianity was accepted because of the social gains offered by the missionaries but as soon as these were realised, the blacks reverted to their traditional religious practices.

did not include either Anthropology or Philosophy as disciplines within the University. He saw that as a failure of the system to engage in its own history, recognising that the majority of people in the Caribbean were primarily Africans and that “Africa will not die” and yet there was no meaningful way to study this fact of Caribbean life.<sup>116</sup>

Through religious practice and movement and music, Africa continued to reveal itself in Trinidad and it was inevitable that African traditional practices would evolve and also engage more and more of the disenfranchised black population. This contributed, as will be seen below, in the Trinidad carnival. Beryl McBurnie continued promoting traditional dance forms and contributed to carnival development. The Little Carib Dance Company which she established, spawned a range of new dance groups, dancers and drummers. Molly Ahye, The Holder brothers<sup>117</sup> (Geoffrey and Boscoe), Percival Borde,<sup>118</sup> Raymond McLean,<sup>119</sup> Andrew Beddoe,<sup>120</sup> amongst others continued researching into local art forms and travelled around the world performing and teaching. Many of those early pioneers from Trinidad and Tobago, as will be seen in chapter three, settled in London and continued implanting on English soil the dances from Africa, via the Caribbean. All were steeped in African cultural traditions, learnt through direct involvement in religious and social drumming and dancing practice.

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<sup>115</sup> Dr. Neville Linton in the TTT series, ‘The African Presence in Trinidad & Tobago: A look at cultural continuity and change in Religion’. Programme 2, 1982.

<sup>116</sup> In Jamaica, the government had established the Cultural Training Centre now the Edna Manley School of Performing Arts in Kingston which played/plays a similar role to the Institute of African Studies in researching and promoting Caribbean cultural traditions.

<sup>117</sup> Boscoe Holder toured with his company to London and eventually settled in the UK for ten years. Both of the Holders became accomplished choreographers, painters and actors.

<sup>118</sup> Percival Forde went to America where he later married Pearl Primus, the Trinidadian/American dancer who pioneered African Dance in America. Together they researched and produced African ballets.



### (iii) Carnival – A Trinidadian Durbar

In Trinidad and Tobago nowhere is the expression of popular African dance more vividly expressed than in the two days of pre-Lenten festival, carnival. On the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday, the streets of the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago explode with mass theatrical presentations. Carnival is infectious, it is a communal, public event and the communicative powers of the human body – the body language – often elicits the strongest rebuke from present day reporters of this festival. This celebration has developed out of cultural practices from Africa as well as from Europe, and has not always attracted positive reviews.

In *The Trinidad Carnival*, Errol Hill acknowledged the disparate and numerous ethnic contributions to carnival and although appreciating that “the Roman Catholic church adopted carnival as a pre-Lenten festival”<sup>121</sup> he maintained that

....the Trinidad carnival is not simply a retention of a European-inspired festival. It may resemble in many characteristic ways the carnivals of other countries, but its ancestry is different: in Trinidad the carnival underwent a complete metamorphosis, a rebirth, resulting from peculiar historical and social pressures of the early nineteenth century. The effect of this metamorphosis was to make the Trinidad carnival essentially a local product in form, content and inner significance.<sup>122</sup>

However, this metamorphosed from something that was certainly not essentially European in style or presentation and though Hill referred to a different ancestry, in this particular context he balks at making the direct link between the carnival and an African ancestry. Though the African presence is all pervading in the Caribbean, the lack of written material prevents one from detecting positive links or making a true identification between carnival in Trinidad and Tobago and community dancing at

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<sup>119</sup> Raymond McLean settled in England, where he still lives. He was a founder member of the MAAS Movers Dance Company in the seventies in London. Besides teaching dance, he works with colleagues on re-presenting some of the dance presentations of Les Ballets Negres.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Beddoe was of the original “giggers” in London.

<sup>121</sup> Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival* (London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1997), p.5.

durbars on the African continent. In Nigeria and Ghana in particular, festivals quite similar to carnival are still celebrated. According to Kuada and Chachah, “Ghanaian festivals today serve religious, social and developmental objectives....., most of the festivals have their roots in the traditional religious beliefs of the various communities”.<sup>123</sup>

In describing the Aday festival of the Akan communities it is worth quoting Kuada and Chachah in order to grasp its similarities to carnival in Trinidad and Tobago.

The morning atmosphere is generally filled with extra briskness and excitement. The elders of the town return each other's visits, sharing morning drinks and wishing their family members the blessings of the gods and ancestral spirits. The town's master drummer and his assistants beat the talking drum from dawn to dusk. The various dancing groups in the town gather in their leaders' houses to go through their final preparations. Around noon people start gathering at the centre of the town for the climax of the festival – the durbar. Politicians and other invited guests begin to arrive. The paramount chief and the elders are led in a procession through the principal streets to the durbar grounds, cheered by a jubilating crowd.....A great deal of the programme involves various forms of drumming and dancing with the public joining in the dances.<sup>124</sup>

Many Africans and free communities of black people in the Caribbean maintained a direct and practising link with their homeland and that ‘local product in form’ as Hill mentioned could have evolved quite naturally out of their religious and spiritual connections and in offering thanks to the ancestors. Throughout visits made in Africa during the past twenty years, I have attended numerous durbars which, in many aspects, are quite similar to the carnival of yesteryear. Carnival therefore could be seen as having roots in the Aday festival, which in the true sense is a celebration of and by the community for the protection afforded them by the ancestral spirits. As the writer

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid.* p.5.

<sup>123</sup> John Kuada & Yao Chachah, *op. cit.* p.82.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.* p.85. According to Kuada & Chachah, Aday literally means resting place but has two meanings in connection with festivals. In one sense it means ‘a place where the spirits of the departed chiefs are housed’ and in the other, it ‘refers to the day of the month when the ruling chief and his elders enter the sacred room to offer thanks to the spirits for their protection’.



recalls, people in the villages did visit each other on ‘jour ouvert’<sup>125</sup> morning, for the first ‘shot of rum’ to get the festivities off to a good start; a time where up to this day, ‘various dancing groups’ – the costumed bands - gather at the bandleader’s ‘mas camp’ before leaving for the street procession and the judging of the bands at the ‘durbar’ – the Queens Park Savannah - in Port of Spain.

Errol Hill’s fine work on carnival provides detailed insights about the development of carnival in Trinidad and Tobago and he identified three key milestones in the history that quite clearly underpinned the ‘Africanness’ of the event<sup>126</sup>. In the first, in 1783, a new royal cedula on population regarding the importation of slaves was granted to the French and because of this, more Africans were brought into the island. The carnival as practiced by the French was more upbeat than that of the Spanish rulers of Trinidad and lasted from Christmas until Ash Wednesday. Inevitably during this period, African slaves also celebrated their festivals, as well as continuing their religious practices, and blended in with the French masquerades.

By the second phase in 1834, the British had captured Trinidad from the Spanish in 1797 and the population of the island began to rapidly change. See Table 4. This slave community was firmly grounded in African cultures and throughout slavery maintained their ancestry through drumming and dancing. Hill continued:

In 1834 slavery was abolished, and in 1838 the subsequent compulsory period of apprenticeship terminated. Suddenly, a new class of over 22,000 free men was created, allied to the free coloreds by racial ancestry,.....

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<sup>125</sup> ‘Jour Ouvert’ – French, meaning opening of the dawn – the dawn of the first day of the carnival in Trinidad.

<sup>126</sup> See also Noel Norton, *20 years of Trinidad Carnival* (Trinidad: Trinidad & Tobago Insurance Ltd., 1990), Peter Mason, *Bacchanal: The Carnival Culture of Trinidad* (London: Latin American Bureau (Research and Action) Ltd., 1998) and John Cowley, op .cit.

free Negroes from the United States and direct from the African coast swelled the ranks of an already preponderant black class and injected new life into African social customs suppressed during slavery.<sup>127</sup>

**Table 4**

**Population in Trinidad, 1797**<sup>128</sup>

Whites	3,341
Free Coloreds	13,392
Chinese	20
Indians	893
Slaves	22,328

By the time of the third phase in 1881, Hill suggested, “we note too that the planter aristocrats not only assumed the costume of their black slaves but also performed slave dances – the belair, bamboula, ghoubas, and calinda – to African drums”.<sup>129</sup> African culture, secretly practiced during the years of slavery, was now a force released by a new people after emancipation and it influenced the birth of today’s carnival celebrations.

Africa’s contribution to the cultural life of the Caribbean is unmistakable. Its cultural heritage is pronounced and its religious principles underpin the lives of thousands of people. But Africa is still very ‘distant’ and has been made more so, through the unhelpful earlier writings by Europeans and other Westerners who controlled the form

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<sup>127</sup> *ibid.* p.9.  
<sup>128</sup> Errol Hill, *op. cit.* p.8.  
<sup>129</sup> *ibid.* p.11.



and production of the written word. The African's oral tradition was unable to impact, as much as the written word, the world stage.

In recent times the re-connections between the Caribbean and the African continent have been growing and what is significant about these new developments, is *the parallel emphasis on cultural as well as economic co-operation and development.*

International arts festivals such as Carifesta (Caribbean), Festac (Nigeria) and Panafest, (Ghana) have laid a foundation to ensure that black artistic, religious and academic peoples meet together in a renewed form of celebrations – 'Africa for Africans at home and abroad.' These increasing cultural exchange networks are opening up new opportunities towards a harmonisation of religious and cultural practice as Africans around the world are learning from each other. The West has specially trained *Babalawos*, High Priests and associated religious leaders who are promoting and consolidating the traditional belief systems and Orisa conferences and celebrations have increased the image and interest in traditional religions. In tandem with the continuance of traditional religious practice, traditional African dance also ingrained itself within the transported communities and re-surfaced with vigour in the New World.

Jamaica, like Trinidad and Tobago and almost every other island in the Caribbean was locked, post-independence, in a capsule of self-doubt. Inter- and intra-island political squabbles and racial divisions permeated the Caribbean basin and at a cultural level, though one witnessed an explosion of creative thought and practice, the ambivalence of the nation states remained. However, when Caribbean immigrants arrived in the UK in the forties and were confronted with hostile and racist attitudes, a new Caribbean identity surfaced. Reluctance to accept black people in churches, pubs, educational establishments, employment and at most social events forced migrant communities to network with each other. Class, colour and wealth differences that were so obvious and

debilitating in the Caribbean were reduced in white society. The foundation for spiritual upliftment, religious practice, body articulation and the power of the drum was instantly laid. The *Kumina* and the *Sango*, the *Dinkie Minie* and the calypso, the *Masquerade* and the *Landship*, the *limbo* and *fire eating*, the *Dambala* and later the carnival, all Caribbean forms of cultural expression, needed and found spaces for expression. The establishment of soulful and charismatic black churches in ‘homes’; skilled dancers and drummers from Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica and traditional drummers from Ghana and Nigeria together ignited, and what we know as African dance, emerged through a tortuous and unpredictable manner. Dances that had travelled from Africa to the Caribbean and retained, for the most part, their ‘Africanness’, slowly found a voice in English cities.



Of course those of us with a little more knowledge and experience of Black dance in this country know of the wonderful tradition which has gone before but has not been built on – as we all pretend for one reason or another it never existed. For my part we should be celebrating 50 years of Black dance in Britain and not asking “What is Black dance in Britain?” – as someone said, ‘if you don’t know by now you never will’.<sup>1</sup>

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Dance Development In England**

In order to locate and understand African dance development in England, this chapter provides an outline of the black presence in England. It highlights how the successes of a few blacks in 18<sup>th</sup> century England remain central to issues of the black struggle in multi-cultural Britain, as many black people still grapple with issues of identity and marginalisation. Although dance was not portrayed as a major part of the black contribution, given the status of the vast majority of black people in England at that time, music and dance would have been the most common forms of entertainment for them as they sought release from their burdensome lives. African dance was reported in Scotland at the start of the sixteenth century (see later) and, given that context, it can be assumed that it was also practised in English society as well.

#### **(1) The Black Presence in Britain**

There is widespread belief that the black presence in Britain is a recent phenomenon. However, “a little known fact is that there were Black soldiers in the Roman army

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Schumann, Tamalyne Kuyateh and Bill Harpe, *What is Black Dance in Britain?*, (Liverpool: The Blackie, 1993), p.4. A one-day exploration with Elroy Josephs and Peter Badejo at the Nia Centre in Manchester on 21 August 1993.

which occupied Britain in the first 400 years A.D”,<sup>2</sup> and, since then, there has been a small but stable black presence in England. Peter Fryer notes that there was a group of Africans in Scotland “attached to the court of King James IV” and that “one of the Africans in Edinburgh was a drummer (taubronar) and choreographer (and)....in 1505 he devised a dance with 12 performers ....”<sup>3</sup> These Africans would have been selected particularly for their ‘novelty value’ and entertaining skills and would have travelled with their belief systems, their cultural traditions and their music and dancing.

Describing the African as a ‘choreographer’ involves some stretching of the imagination, as the term, as noted by Gore earlier, has a totally different meaning in Africa to that understood in Western dance tradition.

Historians have argued about the precise numbers of black people in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; Shyllon has suggested that the numbers have been greatly exaggerated and that there were only around 10,000 – 12,000 blacks living in England by the middle of the eighteenth century. Free or enslaved, blacks or people of colour were locked into the lower echelons of British society along with many ‘whites’ from the indigenous population, and they created social and *political* networks for their survival. The black presence was pronounced, for even as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Elizabeth I was concerned by the “great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm”.<sup>4</sup> Captains of ships, wives and mistresses of the wealthy and others brought blacks to England, the latter’s exotic value heightening their status and making a fashion statement about their owners. According to Fryer, black people at that time were largely involved in three principal areas of

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<sup>2</sup> Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, *Roots in Britain: Black and Asian Citizens from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II* (London: Brent Library Service, 1980), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and USA: Pluto Press, 1984), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Nigel File and Chris Power, *Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), p.6.



work: as household servants, court entertainers and prostitutes or sexual conveniences. Colour differences at that time presented issues for certain sections of Britain's white society and the relationship between the 'black' and the 'white' communities was often strained, especially where these groups were competing for employment and housing. Legislation was introduced to reduce the black numbers in England yet blacks remained and eked out an existence, in spite of efforts to have them 'shipped' for resettlement to Sierra Leone.

In spite of the lowly position of the vast majority of black people during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, some blacks worked effortlessly to improve their conditions. An understanding of their lives merits attention insofar as their contributions still act as a counterpoint to openly racist aggression in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as blacks are forced to 'justify' their presence in British society. Foremost amongst those were Ignatius Sancho, Francis Barber, and Olaudah Equiano. According to Sancho, sections of the white community "most generously insulted us"<sup>5</sup> but he persisted in his efforts to improve the plight of other black people. The black communities collaborated with white British lawyers, politicians, church representatives and others in their quest for human rights and justice. Poor or privileged, black people met and entertained each other and their creativity manifested itself through music and through religious and social dancing. In 1764 they "supped, drank, and entertained themselves with dancing and music, consisting of violins, French horns, and other instruments, at a public-house in Fleet-Street, till four in the morning"<sup>6</sup> and in 1772, after the famous Somerset slave court case, "...near 200 Blacks, with their Ladies, had an Entertainment at a Public-house in Westminster,...and the Evening was concluded with a Ball"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.4.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.15. Quoted in *File and Power* from the *London Chronicle* 16-18 February 1764

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.14. Quoted in *File and Power* from the *Public Advertiser*, 27 June 1772.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the black communities continued to contribute to British society and Mary Seacole (born in Jamaica in 1805) made a significant contribution to the welfare of British soldiers in the Crimean War, returning to London in 1857.

According to File and Power

At the end of the war she came back to London. She was now famous but poor. Many military men now came to her aid. A four-day music festival – with over a thousand performers, nine military bands and an orchestra – was held in London's Surrey Gardens to raise funds for her.<sup>8</sup>

Black people had now 'settled' in England and the music composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in Holborn in 1875. Often abused because of the colour of his skin, he used his own life experiences to his creative advantage and wrote two major musical works in *An African Suite* and *Toussant L'Ouverture*. In recognition of his contribution to British music and in celebration of the contributions to performing arts by black people in British society, Coleridge-Taylor's children (Hiawatha and Avril), conducted several performances of their father's works at the Royal Albert Hall.<sup>9</sup>

But the quality of the life of the black communities was little advanced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although their increased visibility and some of their artistic contributions to society were beginning to have an impact. In 1912 a young Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, first visited England and later in Jamaica in 1914, he established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)<sup>10</sup> as a vehicle to promote African identity in the West and to encourage more links between the continent and the New World. As will be illustrated later, Garvey's message later penetrated the youths of

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.60.

<sup>9</sup> The first of these was on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1924. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's music is more appreciated now than when he was alive and only recently, in the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's programme of 'Music of Black Origin' on 16 and 17 March 2005, his *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* was one of the selected works.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica on the 1 August 1914 and later established its headquarters and several branches throughout the United States of America.



Britain, through its importation in reggae music, the Rastafarian lifestyle and traditional drumming, chanting and dance.

In spite of racial abuse, black people continued to press for equality and justice and John Archer, a photographer from Liverpool, was elected Mayor of Battersea, Britain's first black mayor in 1913.<sup>11</sup> Black people who were marginalised and were fighting against racial disadvantage were now seeking the political route to defend and define 'self' and to stake their claim in the development of Britain. Yet opposition to the presence of black communities remained constant and strong.

Although Caribbean and African blacks joined with England to fight in the First World War, almost immediately after its end, there were attacks on black seamen in Liverpool, London, Cardiff and Newport. Repatriation, suggested as the solution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, resurfaced as the answer to 'the black problem' and in 1925 black people had to register as aliens in spite of being British subjects.<sup>12</sup> Similar to the 'Sons of Africa' organisation that was formed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to defend the rights of black people living in England, 'The League of Coloured People' emerged in 1931. The 'League' published its own magazine, 'The Keys', promoting social awareness and also suggesting that integration was possibly the way to ameliorate the 'black problem'. Many foundation members within the 'League' were practising Christians from the Caribbean and used their religious beliefs to encourage racial harmony through the promotions of social and sporting events with music and dancing. Sacred music and dance evolved into social forms of entertainment.

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<sup>11</sup> Nigel File and Chris Power, op. cit. p.40.

<sup>12</sup> See Nigel File and Chris Power, *Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958* for a snapshot of early black life in Britain.

Black people were becoming more permanent residents and a more visible part of the fabric of social life from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though their status has always been anchored at the bottom of the societal ladder. Various British governments manipulated the ebb and flow of the black commodity into the British metropolis, releasing, as it were, a cadre to occupy the base level of British society but throughout, the black contribution to Britain, especially during the Second World War, was significant.<sup>13</sup>

Louise Bennett, in her witty and satirical poem *Colonisation in Reverse* reflected on the position of Jamaicans post World War II and their presence in the 'Mother Country'.

### **Colonisation In Reverse**

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,  
I feel like me heart gwine burs'  
Jamaica people colonizin  
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by de t'ousan  
From country and from town,  
By de ship-load, by de plane-load  
Jamaica is Englan boun.

What a islan! What a people!  
Man an woman, old and young  
Jusa pack dem bag an baggage  
An tun history upside dung!

Oonoo see how life is funny  
Oonoo see de tunabout,  
Jamaica live fe box bread  
Outa English people mout'

For wen dem catch a Englan,  
An start play dem different role,  
Some will settle down to work  
An some will settle fe de dole.

Jane say de dole is not too bad

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<sup>13</sup> Men and women from the Caribbean served in the Royal Air Force, the Merchant Navy, the Royal Engineers and in the Caribbean Regiment in the Middle East and Italy. Caribbean air force personnel received 103 decorations. Taken from information available on [www.mgtrust.org/car2.htm](http://www.mgtrust.org/car2.htm).



Because dey payin' she  
Two pounds a week fe seek a job  
Dat suit her dignity.

Me say Jane will never find work  
At the rate how she dah-look,  
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch  
An read love-story book.

Wat a devilment a Englan!  
Dem face war and brave de worse,  
But I'm wonderin' how dem gwine stan'  
Colonizin' in reverse.<sup>14</sup>

Immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean were England-bound and according to Tony Sewell,

Another reason for the Exodus can be found in the image of Britain and the way it was embedded in the minds of the Caribbean people as the 'Mother country'. In other words, the rest of the world was on the margins and England was centre-stage.<sup>15</sup>

This historical relationship with its colonies, especially in the Caribbean, still meant that there was a source of labour Britain could explore and

Recruitment offices were opened in the West Indies. Dapper English clerks began campaigns to recruit poor West Indians to a sunny future with various transport authorities. Industrialists sent personnel executives to the countries of the black Commonwealth to solve their labour shortage problems.<sup>16</sup>

More African blacks from the Caribbean were seeking economic opportunities in the UK and Lord Kitchener, the Trinidadian calypsonian, expressed his feelings in song, on his arrival in the UK in 1948.

London is the place for me, London that lovely city  
You can go to France or America, India, Asia, or Africa.  
But you must come back to London city.  
I said, London is the place for me. London, that lovely city.  
You can go to France or America, India, Asia or Africa.  
But you must come back to London city.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Poems: Jamaica Labrish* (Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1975), p. 179-180.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Sewell, *Keep on Moving: The Windrush Legacy The Black Experience in Britain from 1948* (London: Voice Enterprises Ltd., 1998), p.7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Mullard, *Black Britain* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), p.38.

<sup>17</sup> Aldwyn Roberts, 'London is the Place for Me' in *Keep on Moving: The Windrush Legacy The Black Experience in Britain from 1948*, op. cit. p.29. Aldwyn Roberts is better known as the calypsonian Lord Kitchener from the twin-island state of Trinidad & Tobago.

Though a light-hearted refrain it succinctly captured the sentiments of the people from the Caribbean. Africa was not perceived as an option, but through immigration, African culture arrived in Britain. Embedded in the 'souls' of these immigrants was a set of traditional cultural values that were about to be re-constructed within a totally different climatic environment. But new arrivals and new cultures had gelled and enriched British society before, for as the London Research Centre noted

London's development and growth have been fuelled by the talents and contributions of an enormous range of different peoples.....For seven thousand years, since migrants first settled in what is now known as London, people from different cultures have lived together, most happily but sometimes with tension.<sup>18</sup>

The increased numbers of black people released a new type of tension in London, racial tension. Black people were here to build their own economies whilst at the same time contributing to the economic expansion of Britain. Though not incompatible ideals, the notion to the white majority population that the in-transit status of the black had changed, created an environment in which colour and racial differences surfaced, as before, in public disorder.

Economic opportunities triggered a 'push-pull' effect between the Caribbean islands and the United Kingdom and

....when the McCarran Act of 1952 virtually halted West Indian immigration to the United States, the United Kingdom became the only remaining wide-open territory for would-be immigrants from the British Caribbean islands, even though it was far away, expensive to reach, and difficult to leave in the event of failure.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Arrivants: A Pictorial Essay on Blacks in Britain*, it was stated that "the 1950's witnessed substantial migration to Britain from the West Indies, to be quickly followed by migration from Asia. The biggest influx at that time was of West Indians, who

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<sup>18</sup> Marian Storkey, Jackie Maguire and Rob Lewis, *Cosmopolitan London: Past, Present & Future* (London: London Research, 1997), p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: a study of West Indians in London* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965), p.45.



arrived at the rate of 3,000 per month”.<sup>20</sup> Families were disrupted, de-fragmented as in a period before, and poverty, discrimination and failure to adjust to the realities of a new environment never entered the thoughts of the traveller. Black people from the Caribbean were once again moving to new lands and with many of the new travellers, the gods and the talismans of Africa were on the move too.

## (2) Religious Practice and Black Culture

As detailed in the previous chapters, continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora were very religious, and if, as Shyllon has suggested there were approximately 10,000 blacks in the UK around 1772, it could be deduced that many of them who met together to socialise, entertain and organise against their plight in society also continued to call upon their faith systems and their gods to sustain them through those difficult times. Peter Fryer indicates that in England those practices were continued in a variety of settings. According to Fryer

Besides small private meetings and more elaborate gatherings with music and dancing there was also community observance of christenings, weddings, and funerals - precisely those events in the human life-cycle which, if we take christening as a special case of name-giving, figure so largely as social occasions throughout black Africa.<sup>21</sup>

He refers to a christening in London in 1726 and singing, drumming and articulated body movements in rhythmic expression of ‘self’ would have accompanied the celebration of new life, the ‘naming’ ceremony. Those social occasions afforded the black communities a space ‘to be’; the public event, the ‘togetherness’ providing psychological and spiritual upliftment to cope with the vagaries of daily life.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the black population had increased significantly and *sacred music and movement* in the home had been translated into *secular black dance* at the public event, the difference between them requiring no formal re-arrangement, except perhaps

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<sup>20</sup> The Race Today Collective, *The Arrivants: A Pictorial Essay on Blacks in Britain* (London: Race Today Publications, 1987), p.8.

<sup>21</sup> op. cit. p.69.

in '*black attitude in the use of the body*'. The tambourine, the drum and the banjo eclipsed any anomalies between both forms of black dancing.

Although many of the blacks who arrived in England were baptized as and were practising Christians in their homelands, the doors to Christian worship were not as open and receiving as one would expect and there was isolation amongst blacks, who sought salvation through the Christian faith. Blacks who wanted to worship in white institutions felt rejected. According to Clifford Hill,

Many ministers report considerable difficulties in attempting to get West Indians to enter fully into church life....There are apparently difficulties on both sides. English people find it hard to make conversations with West Indians. The same is true of West Indians. Ministers report that their attempts to organise 'mixed gatherings' have developed into 'group affairs', white and coloured seemingly preferring their own company.<sup>22</sup>

The majority of the blacks who travelled to England then were not from the higher echelons of Caribbean societies and therefore were unfamiliar with and constrained by the 'Britishness' that confronted them. Black people had to organise if they wished to express their belief systems but without access to external funding support to either buy homes or build churches, the creativity of the black population found release in another African practice. In the Caribbean, *pardner* or *su-su*<sup>23</sup> was a black way of 'banking without banks' and through the continuation of this saving mechanism amongst black communities in the UK, they were able to buy their own homes. They began to congregate and 'keep worship', rejuvenating and re-energising themselves through religious practice. They sang the sacred and the secular; they danced to *ska*<sup>24</sup> and calypsos.

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<sup>22</sup> Clifford S. Hill, *West Indian Migrants and the London Churches* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.30.

<sup>23</sup> 'Banking without banks': This form of saving was conducted in many communities throughout the Caribbean and in England. A fixed number of persons made an agreed monthly payment and each month, one member of the group received the total contribution. In this manner, the black communities were able to accumulate sums of money for specific cash purchases.

<sup>24</sup> Music from Jamaica that was made popular in the sixties through Millie Small's *My Boy Lollipop*.



Throughout the 1950s many 'Pentecostal' black churches splintered into a wider range of churches but the major groups included the New Testament Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. These churches used biblical texts as the source of their preaching but deliberately avoided dealing with social issues in spite of the suffering of its membership. Aware that the black communities were not totally welcomed by the dominant society and were being subjected to racial abuse, the church's response relied on biblical prophecies (the day of deliverance, judgement for the wicked, etc) to hold their congregations together. Music, singing, clapping and the playing of percussive instruments were key to worship and thus 'the performance arts' flourished amongst congregations. Rituals, symbols, social togetherness allowed a release of emotional energies and frustrations for black people. Non-verbal, body language became the practising Christian's alternative way of expressing anger against the harsh realities of everyday life. Clifford Hill quotes from a letter from a Yorkshire sect of the New Testament Church of God in which it reported that "during the testimony service God's Spirit moved on the meeting"<sup>25</sup> with the resultant fact there was an overwhelming increase in the music and praising, which resulted in the local community making sufficient complaints which led to their services being banned from that particular place of worship. Throughout the past five decades, more and more black churches have created platforms from which black communities were able to express their religious practices.

During that period, Africans from the continent itself were also arriving in London, mostly as students and in that sense differed from the vast majority of black people from the Caribbean. They too travelled with their forms of worship, their symbolisms and their rituals and they too established a range of churches in London, foremost amongst

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<sup>25</sup> op. cit. p.77.

them being the Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim (CCS), a Yoruba sect.

According to Clifford Hill

Perhaps the relative success of sects like the CCS and the 'Church of the Lord' in Nigeria in comparison with the progress of the Europeanizing Protestants may be accounted for by their totally different attitudes towards African culture. The African sects adhere to the African world view which is basically one of immanence in which the whole spirit-world is a present reality. Their practice of the Christian faith.....does not require them to practice a particular form of morality or to change social customs that are indigenous to an African way of life. Their form of Christianity has a spirit basis rather than the ethical basis of the European type of Christianity.<sup>26</sup>

African traditional beliefs, whether from the continent or from the diaspora, were thus percolating through large sections of Britain's black communities from differing but inter-connected philosophies. Within the CCS church, music and movement were integral to worship and black worshippers 'moved' without inhibitions. They were not under siege or scrutiny in this environment and they reacted to and pre-empted rhythms to offer praises to their gods.

The role of the dynamic black church in establishing the foundation of African dance in England is evident throughout the country today. The infectious rhythms of the music, the seduction of movement, the sense of community and social inclusion, the belief in the highest qualities of 'self', all basic core values of traditional African worship and dance, found expression in the cold and inhospitable climes of England. Attacked and ridiculed, denied opportunities and isolated, black people re-constructed their own societal norms and practised African art forms which they had practised in their homelands. Today many blacks who were baptized as Christians have retained their Christian practice whilst also practicing traditional African customs.<sup>27</sup> As Wándé

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<sup>26</sup> Clifford Hill, 'Afro-Caribbean religion in Britain' in *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, ed. by Brian Gates (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1980), pp. 67-86 (p.74).

<sup>27</sup> This is noticeable among the younger black population. For example, many British born Christian blacks are holding 'outdoorings' and 'naming' ceremonies instead of 'christening' for their children. With more and more traditional priests and other Africans living in London, this practice has become



Abímbólé mentioned African religions do not speak of heaven or hell, of fire and brimstone and do not condemn anyone who worships in both religions.<sup>28</sup> More and more accommodation and adaptation was now occurring in the sense that Christianity was now being practiced with elements of traditional African religions blended in. Spirituality, traditional religious practices and traditional African dance which were carefully and secretively nurtured out of Africa were now taking root in contemporary Western societies. As Claudine K. Brown wrote

Long before Africans endured their forced migration to the Americas, they were sustained by their beliefs in higher powers. They came to this place respecting the earth and its abundant gifts, revering ancestors who had passed on knowledge to succeeding generations, and adhering to practices taught to them by the spiritual lawgivers of their villages and towns.

These beliefs sustained them during a period of suppression and sorrow. Their dependence upon one another forced people with different cultures and languages to form new communities, and over time, as languages were forgotten and families were dispersed, new practices and belief systems evolved.

Many Africans adopted and embraced Christianity, the religion of those persons who had enslaved them. They changed the rhythms of the hymns so that they more closely resembled the rhythms of their ancestors...

While enslaved persons were encouraged to embrace Christianity, they were prohibited from openly practicing African religions. Notwithstanding these prohibitions, African-based religions continue to flourish in the Americas today.<sup>29</sup>

Black Caribbean and black African churches are now permanent features within the cultural landscape of Britain. Many have attracted followers from very diverse religious beliefs and of all shades of colour. African gods and the Christian God, deities and Supreme Powers fill the universe at the formal and informal established houses of

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quite commonplace and many more black children now have typical African names, denoting day of birth and African ethnic grouping.

<sup>28</sup> Trinidad & Tobago Television (TTT), 'The African Presence in Trinidad & Tobago: A Look at Cultural Continuity and Change. Produced by Joy Gould. Narrated by Alfred Aquiton. 1982 and 1983. TTT produced a series of six programmes on the above theme. Wándé Ambímbólá was interviewed as part of that series at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on The Orisha, in Bahia Brazil.

<sup>29</sup> Claudine K. Brown, 'We Have Come This Far By Faith: Lessons From Our Spiritual Communities', *Orator*, vol. 2 no. 2 (Summer 1994), 1-2 (p.1-2). I interviewed Claudine Browne in Washington D.C on 6 November 1988.

worship and black dance remains ingrained in the religious and spiritual lives of its practitioners.

### **(3) Western Dance forms in England**

As African dance was being nurtured in informal and religious settings, Western dance in England was following conventional systems. Jack Anderson contends that “serious British dance, like serious American dance, is a relatively recent phenomenon”<sup>30</sup> and if by ‘serious’ dance the implication is classical ballet in the former and modern dance in the latter, his point is aptly made. However, he notes that there were ‘serious’ court dances in England during the early 16th century (Henry VIII in 1510 and Queen Elizabeth’s participation in dance) and also popular folk dances possibly emanating from the Moors in Spain that resulted in the English Morris dancing towards the end of the 15th century. Classical ballet had begun to take root in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when two major homes for this particular dance form were established at the King’s Theatre in Haymarket in London in 1705 and the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in 1732. Dance audiences were on the increase but the forms singularly appealed to the higher classes of British society.

For many years however, classical dance development in England relied on foreign dancers, choreographers and visiting companies and during 1843-1848, the Frenchman Jules Perrot had a productive relationship with Benjamin Lumley at Her Majesty’s Theatre. In spite of the interest in the forms, ballet in Europe was attracting much less support than it had in previous years and by 1850 audiences in London were on the decline. Where Paris and London were at one point in history producing interesting

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Anderson, *Dance* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1974), p.140.



choreographic works, by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century these European capitals were looking towards St. Petersburg in Russia for inspiration.

In P.J.S. Richardson's informative text, *The Social Dances of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* he provided a backcloth to the evolution of social dances in England and although he focused on England, he interlinked dance development in America and Paris, and provided a short statement of one form of black dancing in America.

The *Cake Walk* came into vogue around eighteen-eighty in the South. It originated in Florida where, it is said, the Negroes got the idea from the war dances of the Seminole Indians. These *consisted of wild and hilarious jumping and gyrating, alternating with slow processions in which the dancers walked solemnly in couples.*<sup>31</sup> [My italics]

Richardson suggested that "the Negroes got the idea" from Seminole Indians, although Jacqui Malone pointed out, "to the lively tunes of black musicians, slaves danced the cakewalk, pigeon wing, jig, buck dance, buzzard lope, juba, ring dances, quadrilles, cotillions, reels, water dances, and scores of others".<sup>32</sup> During and after slavery and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural interchanges were already taking place and as far as the 'Cakewalk' was concerned, Brenda Dixon Gottschild noted that

In the nineteenth century, a dance called the "Cakewalk," created by enslaved blacks who stole and mockingly imitated the high-falutin' mannerisms of whites at plantation balls, was the traditional minstrel show finale. Later it became a popular white social dance, another example of whites copying blacks copying whites. The equation also travels in the other direction.<sup>33</sup>

The contribution by foreigners in the development of English ballet was noted above and similarly, black dance companies have been contributing to dance development in the UK for many years. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> P.J.S Richardson, *The Social Dances of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in England* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1960), p.120.

<sup>32</sup> Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana and Chicago, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p.41.

<sup>33</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1998), p.26.

centuries African American singers and dancers were performing in the UK. In *Dahomey*, an all-black American musical, opened in London in 1903 and after a poor start at the box-office, it then began to play to packed houses for over 250 performances.<sup>34</sup> Josephine Baker (the American dancer based in Paris) appeared in London in 1933, the Katherine Dunham Dance Company in 1948, the New York Negro Ballet (formerly Les Ballets Negres) in 1957 and, the now frequent visitors to Sadler's Wells, Dance Theatre of Harlem, first visited in 1974.

The Katherine Dunham Dance Company appeared at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London for six months and was positively received. "Pearl Reynolds recalled the scream of recognition from the audience during the performance of "*Shango*", which projects feelings associated with the god of thunder and war in Caribbean cultures".<sup>35</sup> Following the success with the Dunham Company, Peter Daubeney invited The New York Negro Ballet to England but as their reviews in cities outside London were not particularly encouraging, he cancelled their London and European dates. According to a review in the Scotsman, "ably as these dancers can comport themselves in traditional classical ballet, it is a pity that they should waste time on what is not really their element".<sup>36</sup>

In more recent times, African-American companies have included Urban Bush Women, David Rousseve Dance Company, Alvin Ailey and Garth Fagan Dance Companies. For over a century African-American modern and classical companies have found regular spaces in British theatres and most have been positively received, though especially

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<sup>34</sup> See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* especially p.440 –444 for black American performances in the UK

<sup>35</sup> Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p.141.

<sup>36</sup> Dawn Lille Horwitz, 'The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain' in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. by Thomas F.DeFrantz (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp. 317 – 342. (p.335).



when they present choreography and ‘high-energy’ dances from what might be termed ‘the black tradition’. Black dance, since the specialist ‘court’ performances by Africans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was now being staged in venues normally reserved for classical ballet and thus was reaching new audiences in the UK. African American dance reflected a new and exciting dimension in terms of vocabulary and presentation and complemented classical and popular dance development in the UK.

Ballet was progressing slowly. However, it was not until the Russians, and the impresario Serge Diaghilev in particular, when ballet ascended to unprecedented heights. Fernau Hall suggested that English ballet had ‘fine quality’ but lacked ‘technique’<sup>37</sup> and claimed that it had established itself on the world scene, though with less technical skills than the ‘masters’. However, Werdon Anglin pointed out that

The magic of Russian ballet was so strong and the idea that Britain could develop its own ballet tradition seemed so remote that British dancers adopted Russian or foreign names in order to build their careers. Thus Alicia Markova was really Alicia Marks, Anton Dolin was born Patrick Healey-Kay, and Ninette de Valois was Irish-born Edris Stannus.<sup>38</sup>

Adding Polish-born Marie Rambert<sup>39</sup> (formerly Cyvia Rambam) to the above list, ballet in England within a very short period assumed world status. The stability of the form gained credence with the establishment of classical ballet schools to nurture and channel young dancers. Enrico Cecchetti, the Italian ballet master established a school in 1918, in 1920 Marie Rambert opened one for training her dancers and Ninette de Valois in 1926 laid the foundation for the Royal Ballet School when she began the Academy of

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<sup>37</sup> Fernau Hall, *Modern English Ballet: An Interpretation by Fernau Hall* (London: Andrew Melrose Ltd., 1950), p.7.

<sup>38</sup> Werdon Anglin, ‘The Royal ballet and Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet’ in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Dance in Britain: A History Of Five Dance Companies*, ed.by Joan W White (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1985), pp.53-86 (p.54).

<sup>39</sup> Marie Rambert opened her ballet school in London in 1920; established Ballet Rambert in 1926 and was honoured as a Dame Commander of the British Empire for her contribution to ballet in 1962.

Chorographic Art. This pattern of establishing 'schools' to nurture dance talent neither had nor has, any equivalent in African dance development in the UK.

During the war, dance activities generally were at a modest level. The classical established companies, Ballet Rambert and The Royal Ballet and Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet were supported by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (now Arts Council England) to provide entertainment for workers and members of the armed services and a positive outcome throughout this terrible period, was increased audiences for classical ballet. After the war, "the Arts Council of Great Britain continued to support Ballet Rambert"<sup>40</sup> and the Royal Ballet moved to more prestigious accommodation at Covent Garden.

Generally dance development and practice, excluding ballet, received little in terms of public subsidy and the forms struggled for survival in Britain. According to Janet Wolff, "dance continues to be marginal to critical studies in the arts"<sup>41</sup> and thus, by implication, its absence from these critical debates reinforces the minor position and status of the form in Western society. Against its lowly position within the academic disciplines, it can be shown that dance is still widely practised and enjoyed throughout England.<sup>42</sup> In writing the 'Foreword' for a text in dance exercises and practice, the popular contemporary dancer Wayne Sleep wrote, "dance is fun! It lifts the spirit, strengthens the body, and stimulates the mind"<sup>43</sup> though, as Judith Mackrell noted: "...in general, dance was looked at with deep suspicion by the British public – it was

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<sup>40</sup> Jenny Mann, 'Ballet Rambert' in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Dance in Britain*, ed. by Joan W White (London: Dance Books Ltd, 1985), pp. 15-52 (p.27).

<sup>41</sup> Janet Wolff, 'Foreword' in *Women in Dance: Sylphs and Sirens*, by Christy Adair (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), pp. xi-xii (p.xi).

<sup>42</sup> See for example, Susan Hoyle, *Dance: Discussion Document 24* (London: National Arts & Media Strategy, Arts Council, 1991). Hoyle reported that "The Household Survey reported that 5.5 million people were taking part in dance, making it one of the country's leading participatory activities".

<sup>43</sup> Wayne Sleep, 'Foreword' in *The Dance Workshop*, by Robert Cohan (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1997), p.7.



something that only professionals did, in ballets, pantomimes or musicals”.<sup>44</sup> Given the dance explosion over the past few years and especially the unshackling and liberating stance of the practitioners of New Dance in the sixties, the latter statement would hardly apply today. There nevertheless remains an uneasy tension between the contemporary and popular dance forms on the one hand and the elitist practice on the other, not least in the huge gap between them in terms of public subsidy and status.

The social and mass participation in dance between the 1920s and the late 1950s provided the platform to help stabilise dance practice. Schools for classical dance were established and personal patronage and state funding increased to enable classical ballet to prosper. This stability in ballet practice created new opportunities for Russian performers and Italian tutors to help articulate British artistic development.

Contemporary dance during that period had a similar cyclic existence, though it was never viewed with the same status as ballet. With improvements in the economic situation, ‘working class’ families, many of them never attending ballet performances themselves, saw dance as a step in terms of upward social mobility and there was a growing business in dance schools. Children from all backgrounds, including many blacks in later years, began to attend ballet classes. The perception, by many parents, was that their children’s participation in ballet meant that their life chances would be greatly increased. Culturally there was only an incremental shift in society and ballet remained an elitist form of dance practice. Britain was now exploding culturally and though the Second World War created fractures in the cultural fabric, dance continued to play its part in the social context. Today a variety of Western dance forms are valued

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Mackrell, *The Story of British New Dance: Out of Line* (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1992), p.2.

in society and many can be studied to degree levels at Universities and other institutions of dance practice.<sup>45</sup>

#### (4) African Dance Development

In the first footnote in this chapter the late Elroy Josephs summed up his feelings of despair and frustration felt by many practitioners of black dance practice in Britain. Ten years later African dance remains bedevilled by a stop-start process in which practitioners and dance administrators are being asked to define what they are doing. It would appear that venues and promoters too have created their own framework and requisite standards for the *type* of black dance they wish to see from black dance companies, their visions and perceptions seemingly being in tandem with the funding agencies. In a written response to *Time for Change: A Framework for the Development of African People's Dance Forms* to the Arts Council of England, the London Arts Board Principal Dance Officer reported that

It is generally agreed that the performance work at the “traditional end” of APD is of mediocre quality. “Adapted” work is popular but is shallow structurally and thematically and some “modern work” shows promise but is still underdeveloped. There is nothing at the large scale for promoters to programme. This needs to be tackled before huge marketing initiatives pervade venues.<sup>46</sup>

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century therefore, African dance in England was still in the doldrums as far as the funders were concerned and even when presentations of the forms attract the positive attention of the media, the attitude towards African dance still appears to be negative. African dance development in the UK however, has to be located in the much wider issues affecting black people and black arts generally and the political and social policies affecting these communities. African dance as already defined is an amalgam of emotions, feelings, movements, religious beliefs, symbols,

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<sup>45</sup> Dance degrees in London for example are available at Middlesex and Surrey Universities and also at the Laban Centre; in Leicester at De Montfort University.

<sup>46</sup> London Arts Board, ‘London Responses to Focus Meeting. General Concerns’, (London, 2000), p.1. Sent to ACE in response to the ‘*Time for Change*’ report.



rituals and lifestyle and its continuity relies on its inter-connectivity between its practitioners and its audiences. As Peter Badejo reflected on the current position,

The last thing we have left is our culture. What are we going to leave for our children, if we dilute our dances so much to satisfy the funding system, then there is no dance left in our art? You see, they have to control, so in order for them to do that, they encourage us to do the kind of dancing they can understand.<sup>47</sup>

Against this backdrop and the constant need for defining the form, what is the status of African dance in the British context? How and when has this dance form emerged on the English dance scene and who are its custodians and practitioners? How is it perceived or understood by the dominant culture and what, if any, is its relationship to its source?

In contemporary Britain, traditional African dance and even contemporary presentations of it, are finding less and less space for expression. Funding agencies are searching for dance forms that they can understand, that they feel comfortable with and therefore those that they can critique, influence, control and possibly support. The tragedy of this scenario stems from the use of the 'short-hand' label black dance and the reluctance on the part of some of those promoting, researching, reporting and funding dance, to overcome this barrier and truly investigate the meanings, symbolisms and spirituality that overlay these forms. There is now yet another change of label emanating from the dance department of Arts Council England, (London) and in a recent discussion with officers in the department, it was made clear that "there is no such thing in England as an African dance sector anymore. What we have is many black people involved in all manner of dance in the diaspora and as far as I am concerned, we will be addressing the

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Badejo is the Artistic Director of Badejo Arts. A Nigerian living in London, Peter graduated in dance at Universities in Nigeria, Ghana and America and is a highly skilled dancer and choreographer with a national and international reputation. Badejo Arts is the lead organisation in a recently formed consortium working towards the establishment of an African Dance Centre in London.

issues relating to Dance Of Black Origin (DOBO)”.<sup>48</sup> If ACE’s response is the denial of the existence of a small but active sector of African dance practitioners in culturally diverse Britain, then DOBO grants are likely to emulate ‘Music Of Black Origin’ (MOBO) awards. Initially the recipients of MOBO awards were black makers and performers of black music but there has been a distinct shift and now more and more white performers of black music are receiving awards, much to the annoyance of the black music world. With several multi-racial dance companies claiming that they are creating Contemporary African Dance (Angol Movements, Union Dance, Sakoba, Gelede Dance, ACE and Tavaziva Dance Company to name a few), all-black African dance companies and individual practitioners could soon be totally excluded from public subsidy to create work.

Cultural appropriation is a two-way process but significantly white performers have benefited more in the global economy in both music and popular dance styles appropriated from black cultural traditions. The reverse process is also in the ascendancy but often the black performers are not received or accepted into the mainstream or international performing arena with equal affection. Whether in dance or music, popular or classical, folk or modern, black performers continue to hover on the edges of the cultural circles. Special festivals or a short season in black dance<sup>49</sup> appear on the horizon only to then disappear again until additional funding or the demise of a black arts organisation releases ‘new’ money into the black dance arena. Specifically, African dance practitioners, companies, organisations and individuals remain under intense scrutiny and often do not benefit from the spoils. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild observed

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<sup>48</sup> Meeting with ACE Dance Officers, London, 22 October 2004.

<sup>49</sup> For example Brenda Edwards’ *‘Hip’* at The Place Theatre, London (2002) and State of Emergency/DanceXchange, The Big Mission Festival in Birmingham (2005).



With the end of the millennium comes talk about multicultural this and that, and cultural sources are beginning to be acknowledged. However, the living members of these cultures still are systematically cut off from the symbolic rewards and economic profits of their inventions.<sup>50</sup>

In the UK today there is much political and arts discussions about multi-culturalism and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) arts and culture, though the funding and governmental support to champion change and seriously impact dance development is woefully lacking. ACE Capital Services made a bold effort in its second attempt, to address the capital needs of BME organisations, by ring fencing approximately £30,000,000 (out of a total budget of £90,000,000) for these groups and the media responded with its familiar headlines. “Recriminations as capital claims largest slice of lottery cash for minorities”<sup>51</sup> states the *Guardian* and “Ethnic groups handed £30m in arts awards”<sup>52</sup> adds the *Daily Telegraph*. Erratic and irrational state funding<sup>53</sup> injected spasms into the form and a process of drip-feeding and policies of accommodation ensured that African dance remained on the periphery of British society. The pioneers of African dance were never in a position to attract society’s patronage or to self-fund, but through their personal beliefs and physical energies, created a platform to act as a point of propulsion in the new era for African dance in England.

As there are no benchmarks or guidelines to suggest otherwise, I have divided dance development<sup>54</sup> in the UK into three discrete phases. Phase I began in 1946 and lasted until 1974. This first phase is subdivided into two sections. In part (a) the work of Les

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<sup>50</sup> op. cit. p.23.

<sup>51</sup> Fiachra Gibbons and David Hencke, ‘Recriminations as capital claims largest slice of lottery cash for minorities’, *The Guardian Unlimited*, 13 June 2001, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Nigel Reynolds, ‘Ethnic groups handed £30m in arts awards’, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2001, page unknown.

<sup>53</sup> According to *The Independent Newspaper*, 18 February 1995, p.28, 15% of arts funding from the Arts Council of England goes to dance and given that the large ballet companies receive the majority of the sums allocated, the public subsidy to the rest of the dance sector is extremely small

<sup>54</sup> Dance development in this context refers to the contribution people made towards the stabilisation and increased practice of the forms in England. It notes the contributions of African Dance workshops/performances by visiting individuals and companies to England and clearly recognises their impact on the development of the form.

Ballets Negres, the first African Caribbean Dance Company established in the UK, will be assessed and in part (b), the contribution of solo performers and informal groups will be explored. The wider black experience will be analysed during this period and the London carnival, the major public expression of Caribbean music and dance for the black communities, will be introduced as one of the ways in which the black communities were signalling their permanence in British society. Phase II covers the period between 1975 and 1983 and Phase III begins in 1984. Although Kokuma Dance Company and the Black Dance Development Trust were established in the second and third phases respectively, these organisations will be referred to but considered and analysed separately in chapter four, along with the vision for a new support agency for African dance, DanceAfrica.

**(i) Phase One: 1946 – 1974**

Black dance activities during this period were at an extremely low level. There were Caribbean entertainers, notably Edric Connor, presenting concerts of traditional folk songs and dance, the latter in fact, being an adjunct to the folk song performances. On 30<sup>th</sup> April 1946, there emerged a new ‘voice’ on the dance horizon as Les Ballets Negres and its charismatic leader and choreographer, Berto Pasuka, opened for their first season at the Twentieth Century Theatre in London. Formally constituted black dance groups or companies were non-existent during this period although individual black dancers linked up with musicians to offer dance displays to suit a range of venues. When Les Ballets Negres exploded onto the London theatrical stage with four full-length ballets ‘the giggers and the dance acts’<sup>55</sup> were gradually finding a space for themselves by operating in nightclubs and at social events.

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<sup>55</sup> The terms ‘giggers’ and ‘dance acts’ I have invented as shorthand labels to categorise solo and informal groups of dancers from the 1940s. A detailed list is provided in Appendix 2.



The early pioneers in Black dance development, in the sense of establishing formal groups and devising and choreographing theatrical dance were Berto Pasuka and Richard Riley from Jamaica (1946), Elroy Josephs from Jamaica (1956), Allister Bain from Grenada (1958) and Jeanette Springer from Guyana (1970). Felix Cobbson (1965) from Ghana was introducing Ghanaian drumming and dancing (display dancing) within the education system in Essex and training young dancers to perform traditional Ghanaian dances. A reference table, covering the period from the 1940s into the new Millennium is attached as Appendix 2. As there is no written, published information, this table was devised after lengthy discussions with Alex and Joyce Pascall, Peter Blackman, Allister Bain and others and may still require further authentication.

**(a) Les Ballets Negres**

Pasuka, it can be argued, laid the foundation for Caribbean and African dance development in Britain. Born in Jamaica of mixed parentage (African and East Indian), he came to England in 1939. Like many black immigrants before him, he travelled with visions of creating a better economic and social life for himself. Though informed about dance, it would be doubtful if his vision encapsulated dance as the economic vehicle through which he would realise his primary goal, since even within his native Jamaica, dance as a full-time, professional activity was clearly not an option. As a young man he was an active performer in theatre and dance with his friend Richie Riley and both had been involved in many of the art promotions which the Marcus Garvey Amusement Company were producing. In Garvey's, *Snapshots of 1931*, they performed with over two hundred other 'street kids' and it can be assumed that Pasuka and his young companions were followers of Garvey's doctrine in terms of their self-perception as Africans in the diaspora. Garvey's philosophy about black pride would have certainly influenced them and being involved in acting, singing, dancing and sponsored social

group activities was one way to alleviate the burdens of everyday life. Pasuka also performed at the Ward Theatre in Kingston, though it would be hard to speak of him, at that time, as a professional performer.<sup>56</sup>

Arriving in Liverpool and travelling to London, he began to explore the opportunities to promote African Caribbean dance. Following his illness soon after his arrival, he worked as a model and later in that year was successful in obtaining a small walk-on part in the film *Rain of the Pacifica*. That opportunity created other work in film and he secured a role as a dancer in the film *Men of Two Worlds*, this providing the resources to establish his company. According to Leon Robinson, “Berto and three dancers were booked to appear in the film and they were just told to dance. Berto assumed the role of choreographer and created a small routine”.<sup>57</sup>

From its inception, Les Ballets Negres was presenting full-length ballets and although some media reviews of the company’s work were positive, articles about its Artistic Director re-invoked the language style of 17<sup>th</sup> century England. In *Theatre World* in 1946, Eric Johns wrote that “....Pasuka heard of the wonders of the Russian ballet, so he decided to come to England in 1939 for a course in ballet training in order *to discipline his native dancing*”.<sup>58</sup> (My italics) a year later in Paris, the black American dancer Josephine Baker received similar comments.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> The arts in the Caribbean remain a part-time, leisure occupation for most artistes and therefore in the strict sense they are not professional performers though the standards and quality of the work are quite high and in that sense they are considered professional.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Leon Robinson, London 1 February 2002.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Johns, ‘Negro Ballet: The story of an interesting new venture’, *Theatre World*, vol. XLII no.255 (April 1946), 24 & 30 (p.24).

<sup>59</sup> Jean Cocteau, ‘La Danse: “Masques”’, *Revue Internationale D’Art Dramatique*, 1947, p.44. “Josephine Baker who was the first to introduce in Paris the Negro rhythms had brought primitive dancing to a point of pathetic greatness”.



Johns' comment appeared to be totally out of context given Pasuka's interest in the teachings of Marcus Garvey and his creative and cultural involvement in Garvey's organisation in Jamaica. Richie Riley, his close friend, was at that time working as a nurse in a mental hospital in Jamaica and Pasuka invited him to come to London.

Riley's task was to buy costumes in Jamaica for their first production, *De Prophet*. This production was developed by Pasuka, following correspondence from Riley of his work in the mental hospital in Kingston. Les Ballets Negres' synopsis for the programme indicates that the ballet was

Based on a true incident that occurred in Jamaica some years ago, this ballet tells of a religious maniac who tries to impress village converts by flying to heaven. When he fails he is clapped into jail as a lunatic. Two interesting characters are Madda Jane, the Priestess, who feeds good spirits from her white cup, and Huntta man, who destroys evil spirits with the slicing movements of the hands.<sup>60</sup>

This theme of Pasuka wishing to do ballet was again later reported by Edward Thorpe, who maintained that Pasuka had "read every book he could about dance which at that time was almost inevitably classical ballet".<sup>61</sup> Pasuka was obviously involved in dance, and as there were very few books written of any forms of dance but ballet, it is plausible that he may have had an interest in ballet as ballet texts were more readily available.

Leon Robinson indicated that from his conversations with Richie Riley that "Berto felt that he had hundreds of years of history to draw from and didn't want to copy stylised movements of Russian ballets".<sup>62</sup> This comment is reinforced when one examines the four ballets which Pasuka created where he focused his ideas and choreographic works on themes from Africa and the Caribbean. Pasuka's and Riley's connection with the Marcus Garvey movement in Jamaica had instilled in them 'black pride' and black

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<sup>60</sup> Les Ballets Negres, 'De Prophet', *Programme Notes*, 30 April 1946. Three ballets, including De Prophet were staged at the Twentieth Century Theatre in Ladbroke Grove, London.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p.169.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Leon Robinson, London 1 February 2002. Robinson, a dancer himself, has been researching and collecting material on Les Ballets Negres and other black performers in the UK for the past ten years. He has a major collection of unpublished material of this company, given to him by Richie Riley before he died.

history and this was reflected in the productions that the company created. The inspiration for their ballets came from their cultural and spiritual groundings in Jamaica. On the death of Richie Riley on April 8, 1997, Bill Harpe wrote that

Les Ballets Negres was a company with a cultural vision [of African-Caribbean dance “taking its place alongside Javanese, Indian, and Western ballet”] and (was) supported by the cultural luminaries of its day (the management committee included Dame Sybil Thorndike, Thorold Dickinson, Robert Helpmann, Oliver Messel, and Tyrone Guthrie).<sup>63</sup>

According to Fernau Hall, Ernest Berk (an Englishman born in Germany), choreographed, or at least co-choreographed, the first four ballets for the company. He wrote that

Berk worked with great speed, roughly completing four ballets in three weeks – in spite of the fact that the dancers were nearly all amateurs with little stage experience. For personal reasons Berk found it impossible to continue this collaboration, and left; in the last two weeks of rehearsals the ballets remained more or less in the state in which Berk left them. Nevertheless the collaboration has been so successful that the ballets were an instant success; during the eight weeks for which Ballet Negres played at the Twentieth Century Theatre the house was packed every night.<sup>64</sup>

Although there are grains of truth in his report, for example the status of the dancers and some of the musicians, as these were confirmed to me in interviews with original company members, none of the programme notes that are available made any mention of Berk. Robinson confirmed that from discussions with other original members of the company, Berk made no contribution to Pasuka’s work and indeed, according to Hall himself, Berk had offered Marie Rambert twenty-five of his ballets and she had refused them all, at least pointing to the fact that Berk was certainly not the most gifted choreographer. Assuming that Berk had worked with Pasuka, their differences could have been because of his desire to control and direct the company and Pasuka was not prepared to surrender his thoughts and vision to Berk. Certainly from the content of all the ballets themselves, it would appear that Berk would have made no major

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<sup>63</sup> Bill Harpe, Steps into black history, *The Guardian* 15.4.97 p.20.

<sup>64</sup> Fernau Hall, *Modern English Ballet. An Interpretation by Fernau Hall* (London: Andrew Melrose Ltd, 1950), p.146-147.



contribution, though in reviewing one of Pasuka's ballets, *De Prophet*, Hall suggested that he did. "Pasuka danced with great intensity and had a remarkable capacity for evoking character, but his solos would have been much less effective without the simple and moving mass dances arranged by Berk".<sup>65</sup>

The company's three other ballets, *They Came*, *Aggrey* and *Market Day* were received very well, the latter a light-hearted piece set in a market in Kingston. Pasuka, though largely forgotten over the years, was the first genuine pioneer of Black dance in England. According to Riley

In the mid forties, black people in England were referred to as coloureds; generally they we were invisible and we experienced racism and prejudice and were seen as 'zoo' specimens. We wanted a company with black dancers but given all the negative connotations about blacks, we were not sure about a name for the group. I am really glad people are doing something to revive what Berto started.<sup>66</sup>

Riley, one of the founding members with Pasuka, reflecting on how the company finally settled on its name, added that they didn't want to offend the British but at the same time, they wanted to be known as a black company, hence they decided to choose the name Les Ballets Negres. Pat Salzedo, one of the original members and a white, female, British dancer with Les Ballets Negres recalled:

Berto did not want an all black company. From the outset, he had whites, Africans and mixed dancers from Liverpool. He wanted a multi-racial company, although he wanted to do black dances. Altogether at the start, there were twenty-five of us. Fifteen to twenty performers and about five support staff. Performers were from Jamaica, blacks born in Liverpool, Ghanaians, Nigerians and Ben Johnson from Trinidad.<sup>67</sup>

Pasuka and his company were creating and presenting work borne out of their common experiences. From the works created African symbolisms and rituals would have been integrated into the choreography and, no doubt, the experiences of the continental

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p.147.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Richie Riley, London 6 July 1995.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Pat Salzedo (whose husband Leonard was the music director for Ballet Negres), London 8 September 1999.

Africans who were with the company, would have reinforced his Caribbean African retentions. Pasuka was committed to creating dance from a particular viewpoint. His company rehearsed in studios near to Piccadilly Circus and opened with four ballets at the Twentieth Century Theatre in Bayswater. The company was not subsidised by either the Arts Council or any other funding body or patron. Salzedo recalled

Berto was a really nice man, and worked you very hard. We rehearsed regularly and started in January 1946. He was not a very good disciplinarian and some of the drummers who were from Nigeria often had a little drink and other things as well, and rehearsals were sometimes very difficult. We used to get about £5 per week and Berto used to take about £10 for himself.

On our opening night all the 'greats' of ballet were there to see us perform and I remember Ninette de Valois, Frederick Ashton and Marie Rambert. They were really curious to see what Berto was doing. There was never any interchange between us. I think they respected him as a dancer but probably saw what he was doing as primitive with nothing in it for them. Berto just took on the issues. He just jumped right in and was not afraid of anything.<sup>68</sup>

Frank Curtis, a Londoner and close friend of Pasuka added

You have to remember in those days the average wage was around £8 for the average worker, so his dancers were doing well. I think the Equity minimum wage was about £4.50 per week.

Berto invited me to look at his book. There was nothing to look at! He never paid any attention to money matters and quite a few in the company were helping themselves. In the end the group just fizzled out and I am sure the Inland Revenue was interested in Berto.<sup>69</sup>

Curtis became a close friend of Berto and remained so until his untimely death.

Pasuka's first season in London was an enormous success. He danced lead in his four ballets; all were elaborately staged and costumed and the company toured extensively in the UK and Europe. Pasuka or his close associates wielded considerable influence for in his first season to attract the dance critic of the *Times*, other key classical ballet dancers and other prominent artistes to view and support his work is, even for today, a major coup for a Black dance company. Following the opening night of the season, the *Times*

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Pat Salzedo, London 2 October 1999.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Frank Curtis, London 8 September 1999.



reported “Ballet Negres presents works which impress us with their vitality and sincerity, and introduced to the English theatre a new dance drama..... a novel venture which is a refreshing theatrical experience”.<sup>70</sup>

According to Thorpe, his welcome in Europe was, “if anything...even more enthusiastic”<sup>71</sup> but whereas they were received enthusiastically in Europe, they remained at the margins in England. According to Bill Harpe

Something of the uphill struggle facing the company may be discerned from their exclusion, at the height of their fame, from the 1951 Festival of Britain on the grounds that this was a festival of British and not colonial culture. But as Richie observed with a smile, when news of their exclusion reached Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, the company was invited to perform in a Dutch Festival and received as royal guests.<sup>72</sup>

Larry Duttson, a Londoner, first saw Pasuka’s company in 1948. He remembered being uplifted and inspired and explained

Here was something new and exciting. Excuse me if I’m not politically correct, but those days, ballet had men who were all pansies, skipping and lifting women. Here was a company where men danced like men and the black women, they were beautiful.<sup>73</sup>

Les Ballets Negres undoubtedly created a stir, made an impression, catapulted black dance into contemporary British society and the white media reviewed the work with very warm and positive reviews. The company, unlike every black dance company even up to today, had *seasons*, as opposed to one-night stands, at London’s venues.

Pasuka invested his own money to establish and maintain the company. According to Pat Salzedo,

Berto used a lot of his own money. I think there was always some kind of a fee. Although I was also the Business Manager and did the secretarial work, I was never sure of these things. Berto was unable to delegate and he attempted to do everything himself. At that time Claude Soman owned the Playhouse Theatre and when there was a gap to fill he offered it to Berto. It was a sort of closed

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<sup>70</sup> *Sunday Times*, 5 May 1946. Reproduced from Les Ballets Negres promotional flyer.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Thorpe, op. cit. p.174.

<sup>72</sup> op. cit. p.20.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Larry Duttson, London 8 September 1999.

shop and you had to belong to either the Variety Artists Federation. I don't know if VAF exists or even the Musicians Union or Equity.<sup>74</sup>

An unknown speaker at the Les Ballets Negres seminar on 8 August 1999 at the South Bank Centre (SBC) London, in responding to a question I asked about public subsidy for the company commented

I understand that they did make some incomplete applications to the Arts Council. As far as I am aware, I believe that several letters were written but no full applications were made. There were several applications being turned down anyway as they had limited funds but whether because they were a black group or not I don't know.<sup>75</sup>

Les Ballets Negres was popular but in post-war Britain 'coloureds' were gaped at as something strange and mysterious and it could account, to some extent, for the positive reviews and welcoming position Les Ballets Negres occupied. Pasuka's work was viewed as 'exotic and primitive' but it was the fillip needed to uplift the spirit of sections of British society. At that time also, Ram Gopal, the famous Indian dancer and friend of Pasuka, was enjoying a very positive season in London, possibly for the same 'exotic' reasons. Britain was recovering from the war and people needed to find activities and events which eased their personal pains and distracted them from the recent crises in their lives. Audiences for dance were increasing, essentially as ballet was funded to present community programmes. As Pat Salzedo recalled

There was always a mixture of people coming to see Ballet Negres. You see the company itself was so mixed with Africans, dancers and musicians from the West Indies, white dancers from London and Liverpool and therefore they would all invite their own circle of friends. We always had good numbers wherever we performed. Don't forget there were the main ballet companies as well and they used to come as well. There were rich and poor and black and white to see him (Berto).<sup>76</sup>

Dame Sybil Thorndike, a champion of Pasuka's cause commented, that

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Pat Salzedo, London 2 October 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Comment by unknown speaker, London 8 September 1999. Thorpe, op. cit. p.174 wrote that "The Arts Council also refused to support him with a subsidy".

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Pat Salzedo, London



This particular ballet form of Negro art is quite absorbingly interesting – taking us back into religious beliefs and fetishes which may seem quite wild and improvable but are not so far removed from some of our solid English fetishes and prejudices.<sup>77</sup>

Pasuka was a skilled, committed dancer. As Curtis succinctly stated, “he had style but Ben Johnson was the strongest dancer”<sup>78</sup> and collectively, with the combination of African drummers and British and Caribbean dancers and his close friend Richie Riley, the company excited audiences in Europe for six years. Les Ballets Negres operated between 1946-1953 but the lack of public subsidy and Pasuka’s own diminishing funds meant that the end was drawing nigh.

Les Ballets Negres, that refreshing new voice of African Caribbean dance faded in the early 50s. As Thorndike remarked, they took “us back into religious beliefs and fetishes”<sup>79</sup> and thus maintained the tradition which was inherited from Africa and which found fertile soil in the Caribbean and the UK. Pasuka went to Paris financially impoverished and disillusioned and according to his friend Curtis, a group of English friends collected funds to support him. Curtis and Duttson amongst others, maintained contact and visited him in Paris. He returned to London in 1959 trying to revive the company but lack of funds, amongst other things, prevented a re-launch. Pasuka by then had outlined four new ballets that he had intended to create but *Blood*, (about voodoo and the liberation of Haiti), *Nine Nights* (wake keeping in Jamaica), *De Bride Cry*, and *Cabaret 1920* were never realised. He was forced to seek other opportunities in the theatre and in 1963 whilst rehearsing for Sean O’Casey’s play ‘Cock-a-Doodle Dandy’, he died in his room in “what have been called mysterious circumstances”.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Dame Sybil Thorndike, ‘Les Ballets Negres’ *Promotional Leaflet*, 8 September 1999, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Frank Curtis, London 8 September 1999.

<sup>79</sup> op. cit. p.1.

<sup>80</sup> Edward Thorpe, op. cit. p.174.

Pasuka, who engaged audiences and made them a part of what was happening on stage, produced his work in the mould of the African dance traditions. His choice of material, his lifestyle, his presentations and the rituals contained within them, signified his spirituality in his creativity. The European practice in the theatre, of distance between the 'observed' and the 'observer' for the last two hundred years was challenged by Pasuka's presentations. According to Jack Anderson

The first decades of the seventeenth century were to bring other significant changes to balletic form..... The most important of these was that ballet moved from ballrooms and halls into proscenium theatres.... In effect, the proscenium created a psychological gulf between participant and viewer.<sup>81</sup>

Les Ballets Negres re-introduced that lost relationship in British theatre by bridging the gap between the performer and the observer. Pasuka had closeness, a real reach from stage to seat, something which traditional classical ballet was not doing. Ballet created a social distance and was meant to provide entertainment for a specific stratum of British society, whereas Pasuka's work was about experiences of life, of challenging the myths about 'his people', of sharing the strengths, joys and sorrows of Africans everywhere. Pasuka's statement of 'who he was' was filled with religious beliefs, emotions and feelings.

Evolved in Africa, nurtured in Jamaica and re-presented in England and Europe, Pasuka's work, was not functionalist in the African tradition of dance, but it was challenging and it established a new dimension for black dance in the dramatic sense; it was theatrical dance. Several members of Les Ballets Negres continued in dance and in the arts generally and Ben Johnson, one of the finest dancers in the company, is still

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<sup>81</sup> Jack Anderson, op. cit. p.21.



operating his dance school in Milan, Italy<sup>82</sup>. In 1997 when Richie Riley died, Bill Harpe in the *Guardian* Newspaper wrote an obituary, 'Steps into black history'

The history of black dance in America has been well documented. The history of black dance in England has not. However Richie Riley, who has died aged 87, bequeathed an archive which will at least ensure the preservation of the remarkable history of Europe's first black dance company, Les Ballets Negres, founded in London just over 50 years ago.

Launched into his theatrical career through an imaginative programme of training and performance organised for young Jamaicans by Marcus Garvey, Richie worked in Kingston until he travelled to London to further his study of art and choreography and enrol at the Astafieva School of Dance. And it was in London that he began to make history. On April 30, 1946, Les Ballets Negres gave their premier performance – at the Twentieth Century Theatre – with Richie as a founding member and leading dancer.<sup>83</sup>

Both Riley and Pasuka are hardly known in this country and, troublingly, this is also true amongst black dancers and the wider black communities. British popular culture was metamorphosing. British 'white' dance was becoming more and more elite, creating a psychological gulf, whilst Caribbean and African dance was reaching and impacting upon audiences in new and interesting ways. Performances born out of the personal experiences of the dancers and choreographers were finding favour with London, British and other European audiences. With the demise of Les Ballets Negres in 1953, black theatrical dance rapidly lost its place on the cultural map. As Harpe noted

But for all their triumphal progress across Europe, Les Ballets Negres was always going to find long-term survival extraordinarily difficult. And, while their contemporaries the Ballet Rambert company – with whom Les Ballets Negres shared equal billing for a two-week season in London in 1950 – have survived, Les Ballets Negres gave their final performance in 1953.<sup>84</sup>

African and Caribbean dance had audiences and favourable press coverage but there were no training schools, no educational programmes and no distinguished visiting companies remaining long enough to support or develop African and Caribbean dance

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Ben Johnson, London 7 October 2000. I was invited to chair a panel discussion on a re-worked version of *Market Day* at the Theatre Museum in London. Ben Johnson, Pat Salzedo, Pam Johnson and other original members of the company were also present.

<sup>83</sup> Bill Harpe, 'Steps into black history', *The Guardian*, 15 April 1997, p.20. Richard Theophilus Riley was born on 10 January 1910 and died on 8 April 1997. He was a founder member of Les Ballets Negres with Berto Pasuka.

<sup>84</sup> op. cit. p.20.

in the UK. And as Arts Council subsidy was non-existent and probably inaccessible, these dance forms faded almost into oblivion. Patrons and supporters rallied to the cause but visionaries and promoters for the large-scale work Pasuka had envisioned, were invisible. African and Caribbean dance held on by a thin thread through the cabaret performances by the ‘giggers and the dance acts’.

**(b) Giggers and Dance Acts**

Written information relating to the entire period of Phase I is particularly sparse and thus there is a reliance on personal interviews to detail black dance development during this period. However, in parallel with Les Ballets Negres’ meteoric rise in London, other black performers were also involved in black arts in around the UK. As the classification ‘giggers’ implies, these were individual artistes who generally performed solo, combining with any others as ‘dance acts’ to undertake performances requiring more than one artiste. Cy Grant (folk singer and musician), Allister Bain, Alex Pascall and several others were presenting cabaret style music, dance and theatre. These performers were engaged in other forms of employment but remained close to their cultural traditions and were prepared to share these with any sector of British society whenever they were given the opportunity.

Black individuals who had fought in the Second World War were often lauded before others and Cy Grant in particular was featured in Radio and Television shows almost weekly. This regular exposure operated in two significant ways for the migrant community. Firstly, it subconsciously helped to ‘affirm self’ in a society where the



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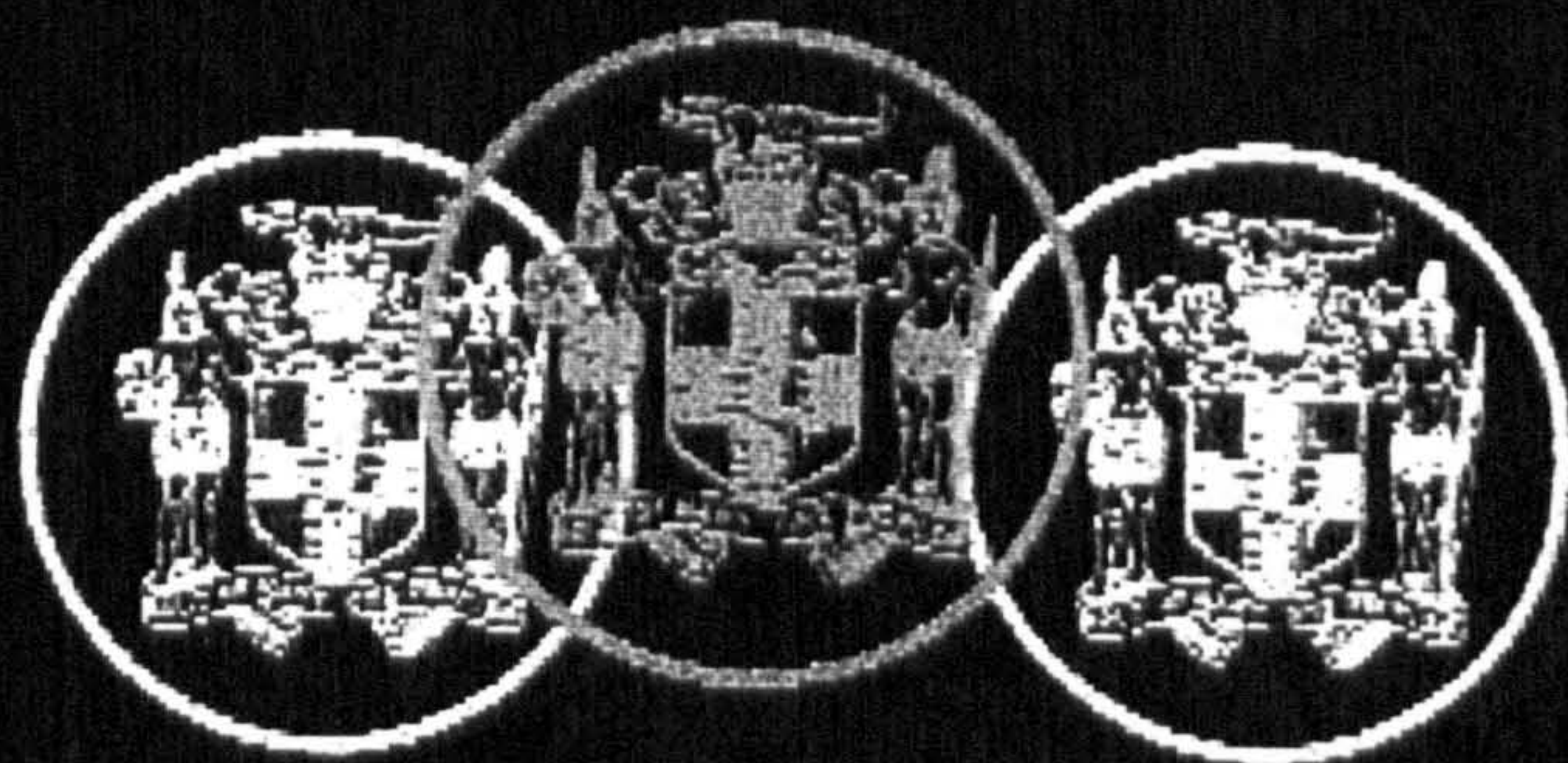
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Shahim Abu

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Amie Carter

Frankie Martin

Jocelyn Yeboah-Newton

Oprah Solanke

Samiat Pedro

Keshia Hemmings

### **Artistic Team**

Producer

Artistic Director

Director/Choreographer

Assistant Artistic Director

Musical Direction

Design

Project Assistant

Leon Robinson

Omar Okai

Ben Johnson

Simone Richards

Akwasi Meusah and Peter Robinson

Keith Lodwick

Kate Hill

### **Original members of**

#### **Les Ballets Negres**

Ben Johnson

Pat Salzedo

Pam Johnson

Joan Lloyd-Evans

Tony Johnson

Dorothy Lawson

### **Shadow Dancer**

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black population was still marginalised, and it also enabled British society to see this development as something of and from the 'other'. Black communities were here by invitation to underpin the economic thrust of the British after the recent World War and were not particularly considered as communities with any contribution to make to the social or cultural fabric of the UK, that particular point being echoed in the exclusion of Les Ballets Negres from the Festival of Britain in 1951.

This was the most fragmented period in the development of black dance in the UK. In the preceding years, there was Les Ballets Negres, organised with a visionary leader and producing choreographed ballets. The 'giggers and dance acts' were by their very nature free-lance performers. According to Peter Blackman

Ambrose Campbell had a high life band that used to play with Ballets Negres and I used to manage Ambrose, so he was always linking up with different musicians to play gigs. The Africans had 'shebeens' in the West End/Soho and in the fifties, with some rich Jews, they bought over the calypso recordings of African and Caribbean artistes, Kitchener and a few others. They weren't interested in the music but it was economics, - music, seedy places, dope etc. The bands use to play and they always had some dancers with them. Then the Chinese slowly started buying up the clubs in Soho and began to evict the English and black jazz bands. The only club that stayed was Ronnie Scott's<sup>85</sup>.

African dance during that period was an adjunct to the music and the 'club scene' in London. Alex and Joyce Pascall<sup>86</sup> remembered that, "Evrol Puckerin was around at that time. He was a dancer from Trinidad and did limbo in the clubs and we think that Geoffrey Holder, also from Trinidad, did the Dambala Snake Dance<sup>87</sup> around the fifties as well".<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Peter Blackman, London 17 September 1999. Peter Blackman, a musician was one of the co-founders of the music and dance group Steel & Skin.

<sup>86</sup> The Pascalls have been involved in black arts development in the UK for over fifty years, Alex being the first black radio presenter with the BBC and later making a significant contribution to the Notting Hill carnival in London.

<sup>87</sup> Dambala – one of the deities of the Yoruba religion.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with the Pascalls, London 1 February 2002.



With the arrival in London of Allister Bain from Grenada in August 1958, Caribbean African dance re-gained some kind of an organised status once again. Allister recalled those early years.

Evrol Puckerin was teaching classes in those days in West Indian Folk dance and Elroy Josephs had a company called Dance Company 7. He passed that on to Carl Campbell who was then a dancer in the Black Mikado. I was in the process then of restructuring my own company Bee Wee Ballet and had invited Alex Pascall and others from Grenada to come and join me in London.<sup>89</sup>

At this time it would appear that the Africans from the continent were primarily involved in music making, both traditional and mainstream whereas the Caribbean artistes were essentially involved in dance practice, consolidating their skills through teaching and undertaking 'gigs'. Often the dancers would use some of the African drummers if they could not find Caribbean drummers. Peter Blackman continued

One of the musicians at Ronnie Scott's bought a club in Belsize Park (Country Club) and when he was leaving he passed the lease to Ginger Johnson. Ginger was a Nigerian seaman but a brilliant percussionist and used to play with Edmundo Ros. Ginger then brought a friend with him from Edmundo Ros, I think it was Bobby Caxton, and the two of them established *Iroko* and made the Country Club an African night club. This venue promoted African dance, plays and hosted international artistes and laid the foundation for most of today's rehearsal studios.<sup>90</sup>

The Caribbean 'gigging' format continued. Allister remembered that they did cabaret performances in 1958 for the boxing matches at the Café Royal and the Pascalls reflected on the activities into the sixties and seventies.

There were some very good African musicians on the scene. Ginger Johnson and Ambrose Campbell stood out and there were a whole band of Caribbean guys. Jeffrey Biddoe was brilliant. He was one of the best drummers and specialised in *Sango* drumming. All during this period, Boscoe and Sheila Holder, Louis St. Jules, Evrol, Raymond McLean, Dorothea Palmer, Jeannette Springer were doing their thing,

I am not sure how they got their 'gigs' but I know that Claude Brooks had an agency and he made a lot of bookings for cabaret artistes. I am sure most of the Caribbean dancers got work through Claude. The audience response in those

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Allister Bain, Birmingham 11 April 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Peter Blackman, London 17 September 1999.

days was brilliant. We played places like the Beachcomber Restaurant at the Mayfair Hotel.<sup>91</sup>

The black churches at that time were 'gathering their flock' together; they understood the injustices that were impacting them but they remained in collective spirit seeking salvation from their faith. The church was strong, united and collective in its vision and mission but 'inward looking'; music and dance activity within it was both a collective and individual experience but open and 'outward looking' and that enabled young people to organise social activities at their local churches at which dance became an expression of 'self'. On the secular front, Jacques Compton and Clarence Thompson had established 'Shades of Black' (1960s) and Jeanette Springer working with both, also established *Legba*<sup>92</sup> (1970s) as a Caribbean dance company. Young black people were responding to the power of the drums and dance was finding expression, more often than not, in London where many Caribbean and African immigrants had settled. Dancers and drummers were not overtly promoting the cultural traditions of Africa but their drumming styles and the content of their gigs, highlighted the African presence as the deities of *Sango* (the Yoruba God of thunder) and *Dambala* (the snake) appeared on stages in London. Through the working relationship between artistes of African Caribbean parentage and the Africans from the continent, there was increased dialogue and cultural exchanges. Blacks from the diaspora were being exposed to continental Africans in music and the arts generally and both were benefiting from the experience. These black 'giggers' were planting new hybrid cultural forms in London and cementing creative relationships that would continue for numerous years. Hostile attitudes from sections of the dominant society engendered the collective spirit and togetherness of the black communities. The practice of the dance forms had more to do with the economics of survival rather than the focussed extension and consolidation of

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with the Pascalls, London 1 February 2002.

<sup>92</sup> (E)Legba is a deity in the Yoruba religion.



African and Caribbean artistic expressions. However, what was obvious even then, were the *emotional and spiritual connections to and expressions of* Africa which were embedded in and re-presented through the performances of these Caribbean artistes. *Sango* drummers were providing the soul force for the dances and Evrol Puckerin's West Indian dance classes were based on movement from traditional Caribbean African dance forms. During that early period, Ivy Baxter and Beryl McBurnie,<sup>93</sup> Olive Lewin, Frank Jeremiah, Edric and Pearl Connor, Jacques Compton and Gloria Cameron were all contributing to, promoting and supporting African and Caribbean arts and building on the foundation that Les Ballets Negres had constructed years before. The Africa Centre in London was providing a safe and social place for leading African politicians, academics, artistes and students to meet, debate and make connections with others of like mind from the African diaspora. The West Indian Centre in Earls Court operated in a similar manner and blacks gravitated to these Centres during their early sojourn in the UK. The Albany pub (Portland Place) and a few others in Ladbroke Grove provided space for steelband music, social and limbo dancing. For Allister Bain

When I came in the fifties the only thing I had on my mind was dance. My dancers came up in October and Alex Pascall came in 1959. We performed on television with Shirley Bassey, it was Granada TV's – Chelsea at Nine - and through that performance I was invited to choreograph a voodoo scene in an *Night Errant Limited* television episode.

Later on I was also invited by Carl Campbell to choreograph *Sango* for Dance Company 7. That took place at the Yaa Asantewa Centre and I attended with Elroy Josephs who had started Dance Company 7. I began to see then how some black artistes ingratiated themselves to the whites whom they thought could further their careers.<sup>94</sup>

Puckerin, Bain, Pascall, Beddoe, Blackman and the host of others during this period in time were skilled performers. They were grounded in traditional art forms and were, regardless of their perception of what they were offering, defined and contracted as

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<sup>93</sup> Both (with Lavinia Williams) are now lauded as 'The Grande Dames' of Caribbean/African Dance in the Caribbean.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Allister Bain, Birmingham 11 April 2002.

performers on the fringes of British cultural traditions but who offered the exoticism of Africa and the Caribbean. Allister Bain and Alex Pascall, for example, who arrived in England in the 1950s were both highly skilled artistes with very broad areas of expertise. In Bain's own words

I really wanted to act but as my father was not a Noble Smith, or a Ramdhanie or Budlall (they were the rich locals on the island of Grenada who controlled the economy) I never even made the school plays. I heard that there was an American starting dance classes at home and I decided to attend. I had heard of Beryl McBurnie and the Holders but never saw any of them dance myself.

Willy Redhead, a civil servant introduced me to an anthropologist from the UK who was in Grenada and he took me to see Big Drum.<sup>95</sup> I remember jumping in and doing something after I had two shots of white rum. I got a part in the film *Island in the Sun* with Harry Belafonte as a dancer and I taught Dorothy Dandridge to dance. Through the filming I met Joan Collins and James Mason and it was directed by Daryl F. Zanuck. I had started my own company Bee Wee Ballet in 1952. Alex joined in 1957.<sup>96</sup>

Where Bain was inspired by Big Drum, Alex Pascall was fuelled by *Sango*.

I started drumming about five and I use to go to *Sango* all the time. I was interested in it since the age of twelve and Munich in Grenada is the home of *Sango*. My mother's side was steeped in *Sango* and my maternal grandfather use to live in Munich. This was my university, stick fighters and kalinda drummers but I didn't realise we were singing African songs, I didn't understand all the ceremonials but knew the significance of certain ceremonies. The slaughtering of a goat or chicken. I knew they called on the *orisha* for certain ills. One of the greatest pieces of *Sango* was the killing of the chicken.<sup>97</sup>

The Pascalls talked about *Sango* at Gran Etang and Harford Village, of *Mamma Glo* and Mr. Collier the African who scared people with his magic, of Miss Vanjee, the *Sango* woman. The recollections are vividly imprinted on their minds and like Bain and others, it was African symbolisms, attitudes and belief systems which guided their dance development in England. As Alex Pascall indicated even more clearly, his life was his connection to his drums.

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<sup>95</sup> Big Drum Dance is synonymous with the island of Carriacou in the Caribbean. The people "have retained a vivid sense of the continuing power of their deceased ancestors and the Big Drum Dance is given for them,..."

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Allister Bain, Birmingham 11 April 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with the Pascalls, London 1 February 2002.



I bought my drums from Grenada with me. I do not let anyone look after them. On the boat we use coming up I use to drum and Patsy Fleming from Bee Wee Ballet use to dance. When I arrived and had to take the train into London from France, I forgot to take up my suitcase as both my drums were in my hands all the time. The pulse of my life is the drum. It's the only thing I know that can defrost people completely.<sup>98</sup>

The heartbeat of Africa, its ancestors, spirits, gods and deities thus came with its people from the Caribbean as well as with other musicians from the continent itself. In London and other cities in the UK, the other Africa, the 'mental and spiritual' Africa was lifting spirits and souls in clubs and bars, hotels, restaurants, churches and in homes.

The words of Marcus Garvey emerged in a new context and reggae music and the Rastafarian movement was seizing the attention of the young. Reggae music provided a particular rhythm and a lyrical content that resonated deeply within the black communities and produced a new dynamic form of social dance, one that encouraged and promoted individual styles, a form that allowed young black people to listen, interpret and 'be', young, black and proud in 'Babylon.' The combination of 'Garveyism' and 'Rastafarianism' (followers of both groups using the Bible to legitimise their worldview for the black nations universally), British legislation and black marginalisation meant that young black people particularly, began to question and search for their own identity. Involvement in popular and traditional black church music (the black churches remained a safe haven for black people) and dance provided a magnet for the 'youths'. According to Dick Hebdige

Africa finds an echo inside reggae in its distinctive percussion. The voice of Africa in the West Indies has traditionally been identified with insurrection and silenced wherever possible. In particular, the preservation of African traditions, like drumming, has in the past been construed by the authorities (the Church, the colonial and even 'post-colonial' governments) as being intrinsically subversive, posing a symbolic threat to law and order.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with the Pascalls, London 1 February 2002.

<sup>99</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.31.

Black young people, including those from the churches, began to create their own social spaces in community centres, in nightclubs and discotheques and body movements and body languages were connecting Christianity, spirituality and 'Africanity' to make sense in their quest to discover who they were.

But England was not positively receptive either to black people or to black culture and though the performing artistes found spaces to express themselves, the harsh realities of everyday living were causing serious concern for the black communities. Individual politicians and organised political parties were fearful of the white backlash in terms of the black presence and once again returned to a period of draconian measures to address the situation. The Labour Party (led by Harold Wilson) introduced the White Paper *Immigration from the Commonwealth* in 1965 and "the black person was thus identified as the source of 'the problem' that had to be dealt with. In effect, 'the fewer the better' was now the watchword".<sup>100</sup> As before, the numbers and visibility of black people in the UK were identified as 'the problem'. The issue of employment was again highlighted as an area of discontent between the races yet blacks were engaged in menial, lowly paid jobs which were vacated by whites; as before inter-racial relationships and marriages presented themselves as mountainous problems for the *white communities*. According to Robert Moore, the "publication of the White Paper marked the point at which the racist attitude began to harden, at which anti-black ideas became respectable and at which the final route of the liberals began. Anti-black politics moved into the reputable centre of the main parties".<sup>101</sup> The perceived racist legislation was adversely affecting black people generally, young black people specifically, and the black protest movements against racial prejudice and injustices in North America were establishing alliances in England. The linkages were with leading black political organisations on both sides of

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Moore, *Racism and Black Resistance in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), p.25-26.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* p.26.



the Atlantic and black activists from America began visiting the UK and providing support with community organisations. Members of the radical, American Black Panthers and Malcolm X visited England, the latter spending time in the Black Country in the West Midlands on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1965. Sacred and secular music<sup>102</sup> combined to produce social dances in the forms of reggae, soul, blues, jazz and calypso.

Several Commonwealth and Immigration Acts had curtailed the inflow of Caribbean people into England but there was a significant black presence contributing to all aspects of British life. The solo 'giggers' were still operating on the club and hotel circuits performing cabaret and maintaining a Black dance profile, whilst at the same time supplementing their meagre incomes. The group expression of Les Ballets Negres had given way to the individual performers during this phase. In terms of dance practice, the full-length ballet was now replaced by the "exotic" cabaret; the theatre performance de-railed to the club and hotel circuit and the detailed costumes and stage sets, to scantily dressed performers on almost bare stages. Dance Company 7, Bee Wee Ballet and Shades of Black struggled but managed to present more theatrical productions but both they and the 'giggers' had added to the cultural terrain, taking black dance into the last quarter of the twentieth century. In spite of the fringe operations, *Sango* and *Dambala*, *Legba* and voodoo, all realities of an African existence, were still there, levelling to the new environment, accommodating and adapting themselves and planting new possibilities, whilst entertaining audiences in London.

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<sup>102</sup> Much of the black protest in America was organised by the black churches and thus hymns, spirituals and later jazz, blues and popular refrains were sung and chanted (call and response African tradition) on their protest marches. The Rastafarian movement, community organisations and individuals from the black churches in England followed a similar pattern to that of America.

African and Caribbean 'body movement' up to this point, found expression in churches, community centres, small theatres, cabaret venues, nightclubs and other secluded, private spaces. These participatory and display/cabaret types of dance activities were created for specific markets and audiences and were not geared to underpin dance as a professional or regular activity for black musicians and dancers. However, many people from the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, had also travelled with their dreams of a better life and faced with open hostility, sought internal mechanisms to help them cope. Positive and creative energies found release in music, dance and theatre and by 1959, Caribbean people had sown the seeds for a festival that would bring the cabaret performers and the church attenders to a greater collective, open and public voice in the performing arts, the London carnival. 'Blacks with attitude in dance' were about to signal a new course in street theatre and dance. African Caribbean dance forms moved from the margins to the mainstream as worshippers and others moved out of the churches and the clubs to the streets as "the first carnival ever in London was held on August Bank Holiday, 1965."<sup>103</sup>

By the middle of the seventies, the black dance presence was not to be stifled or kept permanently on the fringes of society. There were black dancers who had trained formally in contemporary dance schools and there were dozens of 'giggers' who had trained informally in traditional dances and they were all seeking space to communicate non-verbally. By then, London's carnival had grown significantly and was now integrated into the August bank holiday calendar. Black dance and music had its largest and most prestigious stage on which to perform, the streets of London. The black communities welcomed that form of public celebration but carnival also created an opportunity for a minority of attenders to vent their frustrations in a negative manner.

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<sup>103</sup> The Race Today Collective, op. cit. p.103.



Carnival attracted heavy surveillance and close scrutiny from the Metropolitan Police.

Alex Pascall, one of the early contributors to carnival, wrote

**“We Ting”**

A;A; while people jumping in de band  
Police milling round and round and round  
Action on de bridge, the carnival under siege  
News men running wild, tempers flying high  
Not a smile from man, woman nor child  
Me dear Ms Lolita with she roti stall start to bawl, Lord!  
Bon dyé music stop, mas stop, road block, riot start  
Mr. Speaker the year 1976 was Blue, Bottle and sticks  
‘Ah! We carnival turn ole “Mas”  
Yes we carnival, dis Notting Hill festival

Before 1965 we strive to keep alive  
This glorious celebration  
Derived from emancipation, exploitation  
Deprivation and immigration.  
We carnival, the pride and joy of a Caribbean Nation  
On narrow streets where people meet people  
In a joyful ripple of nostalgic action  
Feeling high in an atmosphere  
Eating and Drinking we can of Red Stripe and Carib Beer  
Rum, Roti, Mauby, fry fish, rice and peas and we ginger beer  
Make this Carnival we annual affair  
Yes, we ting dis Nottinghill Carnival  
“Mas” Music and Movement throughout the year  
In Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester  
Preston, Bristol, Huddersfield, Oxford  
Birmingham, Reading and Swindon

In the Boroughs of Brent and Waltham Forest  
Scene ---is we carnival jammin’  
From London city to Holland  
Paris, Nice and Italy  
‘tween land and Sea  
All ah we jammin’<sup>104</sup>

On the streets of London Africans in the diaspora were raising a new voice and carnival was becoming the driving force for that cultural expression. The transition of the performing arts from ‘inside to outside’, ‘from private to public’, ‘from sacred to secular’, signalled an attitudinal change in black people in London as they consciously

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<sup>104</sup> Alex Pascall, *“We Ting” Notting Hill Carnival: A Poetic Narrative* (London: Good Vibes Records & Music Ltd., 1991), p.9-10.

decided that they were here to stay and not simply in transit. Performance artistes from the Caribbean were now being joined by multitudes of other blacks in the diaspora and carnival in August began to symbolise a permanent presence for black people in London. In recent years, the cultural contributions to this growing event has come from differing sources as Asians, continental Africans, Europeans, 'Latin Americans' and many others mesh into this original African Caribbean dance explosion. Within a short period of time throughout England and Europe, the black Caribbean and African festival had been instituted. In the Foreword to the latest review of carnival development in London, *Notting Hill Carnival: A Strategic Review*, Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, points out that

Since its humble origins as an indoor event in 1959, the Carnival has grown organically in recent years, attracting more than 700,000 visitors and revellers. In 1999, the number of people attending the Carnival reached 1.2 million – a clear indication of how successful this summer festival has become.<sup>105</sup>

And he concluded, "the Notting Hill Carnival is here to stay".<sup>106</sup> Carnival provided and still provides, the largest public stage for the dance forms of Africa and the Caribbean to be exposed and to be accessible to all communities. From the 'collective' forms of togetherness of the indoor church event to the 'individuality' and self-expression of the club event, carnival has once again re-introduced 'the collective spirit' and artistic endeavour of the black communities in England.

## **(ii) Phase Two: 1975 – 1983**

From the mid- seventies, there was a gearshift in the development of Caribbean and African dance in England and that pioneering work was led by a handful of practitioners, tutors and supporters. Foremost amongst those pioneers in Caribbean and African dance were Peter Blackman from Barbados, the Andersons from Bristol (of

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<sup>105</sup> Rosemary Emodi and Colin Prescod, *Notting Hill Carnival: A Strategic Review* (London: Greater London Authority, 2004), p.5.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.* p.5.



Jamaican parentage), Ben Baddoo, George Otoo and George Dzikunu from Ghana, Carl Campbell and Chester Morrison from Jamaica, Julia Mathunjwa and Betty Boo from South Africa, Ginger Johnson and Ambrose Campbell from Nigeria, Tony Morgan and Kif Higgins from Liverpool and myself. Other dancers and drummers supported all of the above, but the skills and intellect the leaders introduced, galvanised traditional African and Caribbean dancing to a new level. In those early days of this second phase of development, black dance flourished, as it did earlier, primarily because of the commitment and dedication of the leaders of the various groups and on the amount of time, effort and resources, which they could personally invest in the form. Public subsidy was enjoyed by relatively few.

As black people had publicly pronounced their intentions of permanent settlement in the UK through the creative arts and carnival, race relations in Britain were hovering at its lowest level.

The British public had been led to believe that a large Black presence is a threat to the nation's general well-being....And while Parliament is busy making laws to keep out Black people, it is at the same time busy setting up agencies like the Commission for Racial Equality to promote racial harmony between White people and Black people already settled here.<sup>107</sup>

The black communities were being maintained at the fringes of society and the various arts associations around England appeared to be unaware of black cultural activities. In *Eye Witness – A backwards look at West Midlands 1971 -1991*, the authors noted

An immediate problem facing the Association in its wish to support the Arts of Black and Asian communities was its own lack of contact with, and knowledge of, existing and potential cultural activities...In 1982, following a successful bid to the Arts Council for extra funding, Laxmi Jamdagni was appointed to begin work on a five year plan. In the following year West Midlands Ethnic Minority Arts Service was established as an independent project to provide training and support with funding from commercial sources and Birmingham City Council.

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<sup>107</sup> Ashton Gibson with Charles Lewis, *A Light in the Dark Tunnel* (London: Centre for Caribbean Studies, 1985), p.76-77.

Under the direction of Pogus Caesar, WEMAS stimulated a widening debate between WMA and the artists and audiences of black communities.<sup>108</sup>

During this period Kokuma Dance Company was already established and had a visible and noted presence in Birmingham and the Handsworth Cultural Centre, also in Birmingham, was alive with visual and performance artistes, including Pogus Caesar. Laxmi Jamdagni recalled her introduction into the arts in the West Midlands at the Herbert Art Gallery's exposition of black work by noting that "a lot of Black people turned up, but there was a tense feeling; some of the older white people felt threatened, I think, by what looked like an invasion of "their" space".<sup>109</sup>

Black performers nationally continued rehearsing and presenting work at every opportunity they were able to. Peter Blackman, after joining Ginger Johnson as a percussionist then established Steel an' Skin pointing out that they "were the first black music and dance group to get funding from the Arts Council."<sup>110</sup> Steel an' Skin led the revolution in the re-emergence of traditional African dance in England amongst the black Caribbean communities. The band worked with a wide range of performers, including many distinguished African dancers and drummers and genuinely stimulated a new interest in Africa, its people and its culture. They energised young people into a new African dawn; they conducted national workshops in dance and drumming and encouraged local community groups to perform with them. Collectively they worked to support many young black people whilst they were starting their own dance companies. Ekome in Bristol, Lanzel in Wolverhampton and Daledo in Liverpool were all supported by Peter Blackman and his colleagues and these groups were learning social and religious dances, mainly from Ghana. Chester Morrison of Lanzel recalled

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<sup>108</sup> C. Bailey, the authors and WMA, 'Eye Witness – A backwards look at West Midlands Arts 1971 – 1991', WMA 1992. p.17.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* p.19.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Peter Blackman, London 17 September 1999.



We were set up in 1975 after working with Steel an' Skin. They had Peter Blackman, Bravo, 'Bubbles' and Ben Baddoo from Ghana and we worked with Ben to develop Lanzel. We believe in Africa and wanted to do traditional dances.<sup>111</sup>

During this second phase of development, African and Caribbean dance forms were being perceived not as an 'art form' but as an activity to engage young blacks within the domains of social welfare and economic development. According to Morrison

Many schools wanted classes in African dance and Lanzel got a grant from Wolverhampton Council for Community Relations to enable them to appoint Ben Baddoo for eighteen months to work with them. Later they successfully applied to the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and were able to take people into the group via the YTS and YOP employment programmes.<sup>112</sup>

According to Morrison and others, the responses to applications to regional arts funding organisations were all negative. At this same time Ekome in Bristol were following a similar path to Lanzel via the MSC programmes, though Ekome did later become a client of the Arts Council of England. The Anderson family were driving Ekome with some panache and besides working with a range of African and Caribbean tutors in the UK, they were making several visits to Ghana themselves to research and develop their techniques, knowledge and skills base. The traditional African form was present in Bristol, Liverpool<sup>113</sup> and Wolverhampton. Barry Anderson of Ekome recalls

In our area in Bristol (St. Pauls) there was nothing to do for black youngsters. We use to hang around the community centre but when we started doing African dance, there was a new kind of feeling in the area. I remember when Steel an' Skin started with us, how much energy there was in rehearsals and then at performances. The minute you put your costumes on and hear the drums, you became different. We just knew we wanted to dance but it was sometime later when we really started doing our own research into African culture for ourselves.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with Chester Morrison, former Artistic Director of Lanzel, Wolverhampton 23 February 2002.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Daledo was established in 1981 after working with Steel an' Skin and was led by Kif Higgins.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Barry Anderson, London 7 July 2002.



# CARL CAMPBELL DANCE COMPANY

**21 years**  
of Contemporary Caribbean Dance Theatre in Britain



The Caribbean dance from 'The Path' (1980)



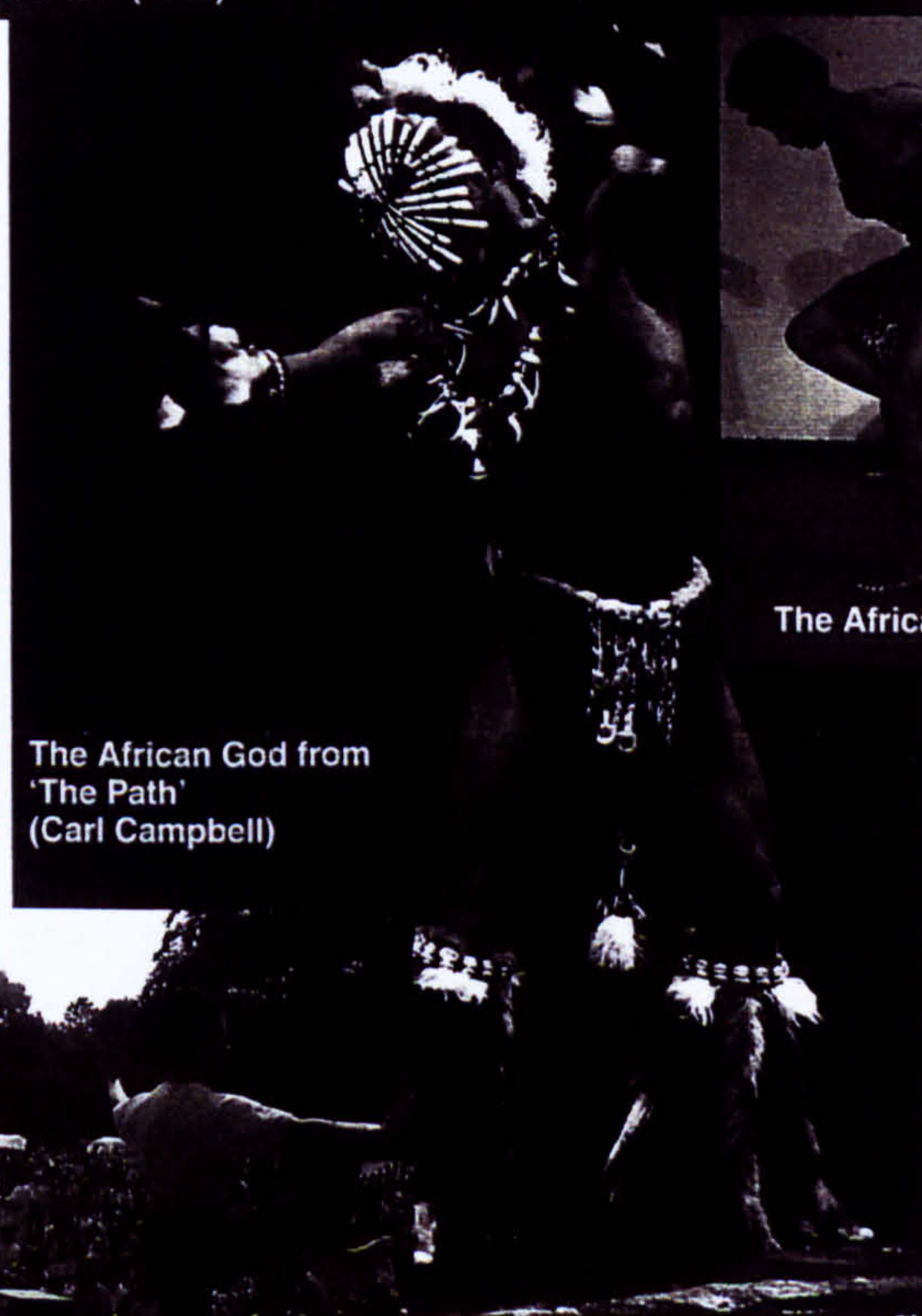
The 23rd Psalm (1990)



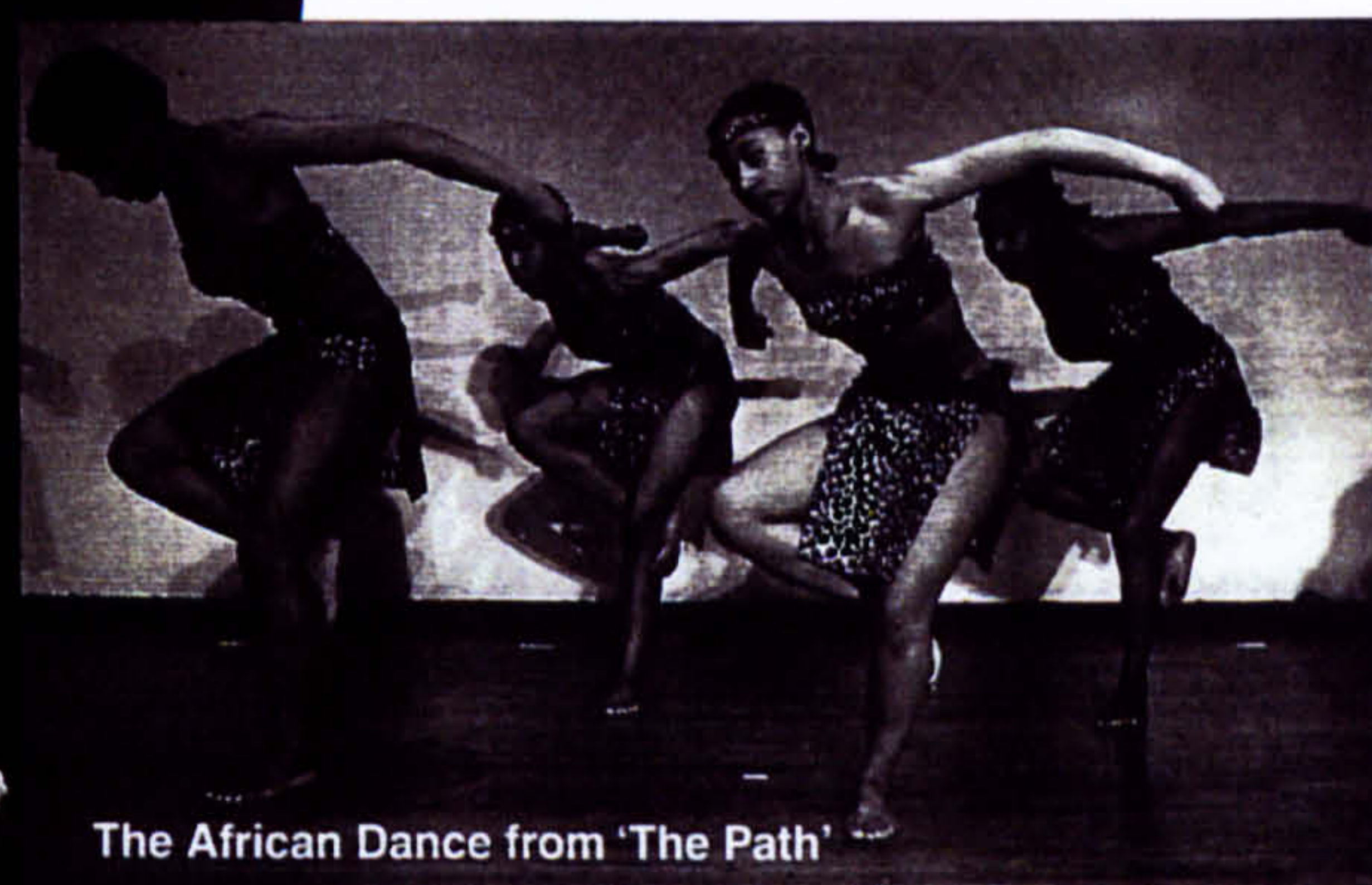
'Visions' (1990)



'Heritage' (1986)



The African God from  
'The Path'  
(Carl Campbell)



The African Dance from 'The Path'



Belair Mansions open air  
performance (1989)



'Respect Showcase 1993' CCDC7 works with  
schools, colleges, elderly people, and all  
members of the community to present  
exciting and dynamic dance events



'Dance for the Deaf' – Royal Opera House (1987)



Elderly Workshop



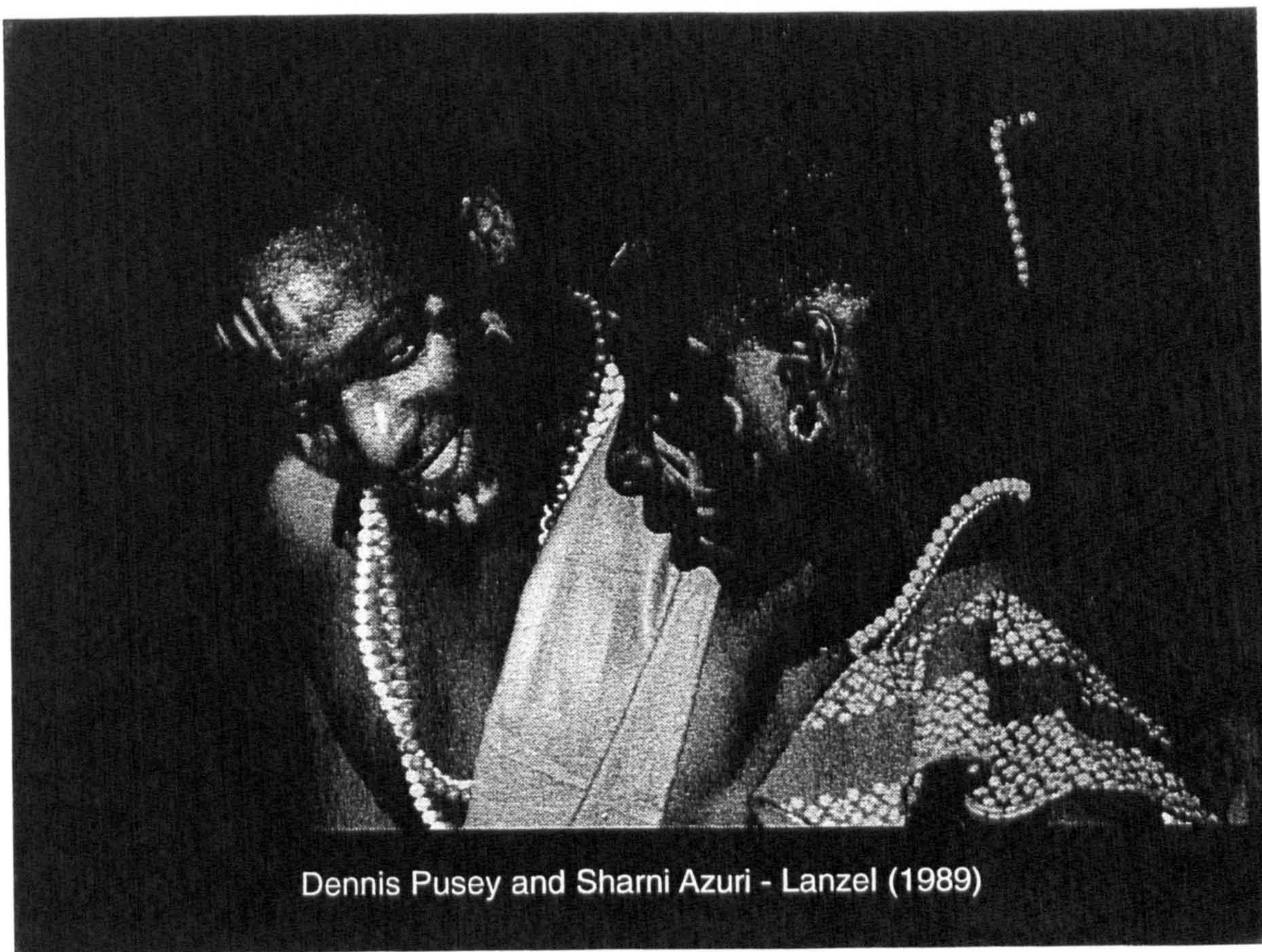
Respect Showcase (1993) 'Myself My Body'

*Carl Campbell's vision was to create a Contemporary Caribbean Dance Company that illustrated the importance and excellence of Caribbean Dance as a performing art and at the same time educate people in an understanding of the Caribbean and its cultural traditions*

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Sonya Murison (Chair), Rexford Godfrey (Vice Chair), Rabia Rahim (Secretary), Charles Wood (Treasurer), Lorraine Baker, Phillipa Beagley, Lynne Cooper, Teresa Early, Annette Rose-Warren, Beverley St Louis.  
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION regarding performances, workshops, residencies or community classes, youth dance, please contact CCDC7 at Thomas Calton Centre, Alpha St, Peckham, London SE15 4NX. Tel: 020 7639 4875 (phone, fax, Minicom. Email address: ccdc7@easynet.co.uk)

BLACK PIONEERS





Dennis Pusey and Sharni Azuri - Lanzel (1989)



The effects of racial prejudice were being experienced regularly and large sections of the black communities felt that they were under siege in their own homes even though by then “two out of every five black people in Britain were born here”.<sup>115</sup> Black youths wanted to seek alternative routes to their parents to accommodate their lifestyle and though many were thoroughly grounded in the black churches and its African Caribbean styles of worship and belief systems, they were destined to change the course of black-white relationships in the UK. Linton Kwesi Johnson, from Jamaica but resident in London from 1963, summed up the position of black young people in his poem YOUT REBELS.

a bran new breed of blacks  
have now emerged,  
leadin on the rough scene,  
breakin away  
takin the day,  
saying to capital neva  
moving forwud hevva.

young blood  
yout rebels:  
new shapes  
shaping  
new patterns  
creating new links  
linkin  
blood risin surely  
carvin a new path,  
movin forwud to freedom.<sup>116</sup>

The English language was treated disparagingly by the youths and Kwesi Johnson captured the essences of the new modes of communications for young blacks. Physical appearances changed and baggy clothes, African hairstyles, new dance forms, soul food, new systems of beliefs, a new black lifestyle, exploded during the 1970s. There were no formal schools of black dance and young inner city youths, who were galvanised by the

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Fryer op. cit. p.387.

<sup>116</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications Ltd, 1975), p.21.



activities of black protesters wanted to express themselves in their forms of expression, of language, of body language. They began to group together and created dance patterns for themselves, recalling music and movement from their church backgrounds, from their parents' interpretation of their Caribbean lifestyles and from a scattered range of Ghanaians (mostly) who were now living in London. Black dance styles however were already embedded in the community, amongst the more disadvantaged sections. Hermin McIntosh from Birmingham recalls

I remember when I was starting my youth dance group at WELD, I had a lot of problems from the parents. I could not say that I had an African dance teacher because many of the parents still believed that Africa was primitive and wouldn't let the youths come. In the end I had to tell them that I would personally help the children with their homework and then drop them home, if they were allowed to attend the dance workshops. It worked and Sankofa was set up with Ben Baddoo from Ghana, teaching us.<sup>117</sup>

In London, dance development received an enormous boost when in 1977, according to Edward Thorpe, "the Arts Council and the Greater London Arts Association were providing limited sums in support of another Black dance venture, MAAS Movers".<sup>118</sup> Developed out of the Minority Arts Advisory Service, hence its name, MAAS Movers were a combination of traditional Caribbean and Western contemporary trained dancers, including 'giggers' Evrol Puckerin and Raymond McLean and several other professional dancers. The Associate Directors of the Company were Evrol Puckerin and Greta Mendez both from Trinidad and Tobago and the Artistic Director, American Ray Collins, supported them. As a company the dancers in MAAS Movers were much better trained than Les Ballets Negres and organisationally, they were structured and stable. Some of the company's members were formally trained in Western modern dance techniques and were highly skilled dancers. Their organisational support staff was ample and they had the guidance and support of an American dancer who had trained with Martha Graham. A company of black dancers, they opened in London at the Oval

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with Hermin McIntosh, Birmingham 16 February 2002.

<sup>118</sup> Edward Thorpe, *op. cit.* p.175.

House on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1977 and “we were very well received”.<sup>119</sup> However the ‘giggers’ in the company were not used to the rigid regime of a professional full-time company and very shortly after the launch, fissures began to appear. In their second season, they played at the Riverside Studios in London and later that year, they joined with others at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, to present “a feast of music and dance from India, Africa and the Caribbean”.<sup>120</sup> Their programme on that night was eclectic ranging from *Women in Journey* by Ray Collins to *In Limbo* and *Spirits* by Greta Mendez and Evrol Puckerin. Both of the latter pieces featured Selwyn Baptiste on drums. This new emerging black dance company, like Les Ballets Negres before, drew on experiences from their own cultural backgrounds to create contemporary work whilst still reflecting ‘their roots’.

On the bill at the Crucible Theatre were several other ‘giggers’ and ‘dance acts’ including Shades of Black, Jeanette Springer and Dorothy Palmer, the latter who had earned for herself the title “Queen of Limbo”.<sup>121</sup> MAAS Movers, due to a variety of internal conflicts, lasted only a short period, though some of its original dancers attempted to continue in different groups without much success. From discussions with several of the original members of MAAS Movers, it became apparent that there were both artistic as well as organisational differences which led to the demise of this first established all black company in London.

In London there was growth in African Dance in the Diaspora (ADD – Caribbean, essentially from Trinidad and Tobago) with the ‘giggers and dance acts’ whereas in the regions the thrust was in establishing traditional African dance groups with, more or less, regular, fixed group members. In the case of the latter, most of the groups were

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Greta Mendez, one of the original Associate Directors, London 7 April 2001.

<sup>120</sup> Crucible Theatre Sheffield, ‘Khathakali and Calypso’, *Programme Notes*, 26-28 January 1978.

<sup>121</sup> Crucible Theatre Sheffield, ‘Khathakali and Calypso’, *Programme Notes*, 26-28 January 1978.



using one or two of the same tutors to both teach and perform with the companies and the African dances, for the most part, were almost all identical within the traditional dance fraternity. Dance Company 7 was still promoting aspects of Caribbean dances and Julia Mathunjwa and Betty Boo established a South African traditional music and dance company Shikisha in London in 1981, following the closure of the West End, South African musical Ipi Tombi.

The popular limbo dance and steel band players were now entertaining audiences in clubs and at special social events whereas the African dance groups were finding limited platforms in schools, community centres and outdoor events. The latter groups however were much more about promoting African culture in a positive manner and thus directly using the dance forms to promote 'black' education and laying a foundation for a revaluation of Africa's cultural contribution to the West. Young black people were proud to be involved in African dance although the degrees of involvement varied over the country. This emergent black dance culture was being practised largely in a society, which was marginalising black people in general, and attempts to produce work in mainstream venues created frustrations for practitioners. African dance nonetheless and the assertion of 'who I am' found expression and its own niche market amongst black communities within inner city areas.

In the mid 70s to the early 80s, African dance was at its most visible in the UK. In addition to the companies already established, I founded Mystic and the Israelites/Kokuma Dance Company<sup>122</sup> (1977) in Birmingham and African dance was taking a foothold throughout the UK. The majority of the practitioners of African dance were non-professionals and the forms flourished due to a lot of the pioneering work

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<sup>122</sup> See detailed information on Kokuma in Chapter 4.

undertaken by Steel an' Skin. Like Steel an' Skin, Kokuma also began supporting a range of younger dancers wishing to become involved in African and Caribbean dance. These included Kizzie (Leicester), Ajah (Derby) and Kantamanto (Manchester). New tutors, new dancers and musicians from the continent and new dance companies were appearing regularly. Uthingo, formed by Elliot Ngubane, also out of the South African West End production Ipi Tombi when it completed its run, was offering traditional and township performances. Shikisha had expanded their programmes of education work and were offering training programmes in South African arts and crafts. Others followed including Dagarti Arts, African Dawn, Irie! Dance Company and Adzido Pan-African Ensemble in London, Adinkra in Bristol and Wantu Wanzuri and Danse de L'Afrique (DLA) in Birmingham. Individuals including Ben Baddoo, Felix Cobbson, Mario Diekuroh, Stephen Blagrove, Norman Stephenson, Charles James, George Otoo, George Dzikunu, Peter Blackman and the Andersons – Barry, Angela, Paula, to name a few, were offering African traditional drumming and dancing and Caribbean workshops around the country and there was a real and growing sense of belonging to a specific dance sector. People, especially young people, were gravitating to the sounds of traditional African drumming and dances. As Doreen Forbes, a former member of Kokuma remembered, "I just came along with my friends Pat Donaldson and Audrey Seymour to look at what they were doing but I know when that drum 'hits' you, you just can't forget it or get it out of your blood".<sup>123</sup>

The opportunities to showcase African dances properly were hardly available for many of those struggling groups and many displays and performances were taking place in inadequate community centres and a very few small-scale venues. As the Director of both the Handsworth Cultural Centre (HCC, 1980) and later the Community And

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with Doreen Forbes, Birmingham 6 June 1996.



Village Entertainment (CAVE)<sup>124</sup> Arts Centre (1985) in Birmingham, I was able to support local dance companies through many periods of difficulty and also to support African dance development in a very specific way. H. Patten<sup>125</sup> and later Hilary Carty<sup>126</sup> were appointed to work at the CAVE and almost every black dance group which existed in England at that time, received direct support from the CAVE, either through performances or lecture demonstrations and training programmes. Birmingham and the West Midlands, at one time during this effervescent period in the history of black dance, had the most groups and classes in African music and dance. Although London had several performance companies, it was the training and administrative support and opportunities which the HCC and CAVE were able to offer in the regions, which maintained many in the Black dance profession. In those early days, both the HCC and the CAVE ensured that there was a steady stream of overseas black dance professionals working in the UK and many professional dancers from Jamaica (Jackie Guy, Barry Moncrieffe, Sheila Barnett) and from Ghana (Francis Nii Yartey, Gideon Midawo and others) first came to England as tutors.

The CAVE's studio theatre (capacity 120) staged almost every black dance company and most played to full houses. Many of the smaller community groups with limited skills and experience, presented, more or less, the same repertoire with varying degrees of competence. Energy levels of the performers were always high, costumes were invariably simple wraps and trousers and the music, live or recorded, was infectious. The artistic programmes were in the form of display dancing i.e. a traditional dance, followed by a drumming/singing interlude, this pattern being repeated for the evening.

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<sup>124</sup> Community And Village Entertainment (CAVE) was developed in the Moseley area of Birmingham, following the success of the Handsworth Cultural Centre in the north of the city.

<sup>125</sup> H. Patten was a graduate visual artist then but who was also involved in African Dance. Today he remains one of the leading dance artistes in this country.

<sup>126</sup> Hilary Carty, a graduate contemporary dancer, also spent a year researching and teaching at the Cultural Institute in Jamaica. Formerly the Director of Dance at the Arts Council of England, Hilary is now the Director of Performing Arts, Arts Council England.

Dances included the social, ceremonial and religious dances from Ghana with some improvised pieces from the Caribbean. The *Gahu*, *Kpanlogo*, *Siyi*, *Kpatcha*, *Damba-Takai* and *Agbekor* featured and they were performed alongside calypso and reggae pieces. At the CAVE audiences were generally mixed in terms of ethnicity, aged between 18 –35 of both sexes and were very appreciative.

Dance, African and Caribbean, was about a heightened affirmation of ‘self’; about participation and personal identification and to an extent, it was an articulated voice from the more marginalised youth sections of British black society, indicating a form of political expression through its public presentations. Many of these young practitioners had experienced the power and social cohesion of the black Christian faith at some stage in their lives and were now complementing that with an alternative lifestyle that was re-affirming their spirituality and re-connecting them mentally with their ancestral home. Chester Morrison, founder and Artistic Director of Lancel saw his dancers and company as reflecting that political element within the dance movement. Morrison recalled:

Part of the problem for me is the fact that if we go back to the 70s and the growth and development of African Peoples’ dance here, then you’ll find that people who were centrally involved also had other political affiliations and were operating within a wider political context. The context was that dance was an aspect of an expression, not a total expression. It was not what we wanted to achieve but it was important that most of the practitioners saw who they were.<sup>127</sup>

Morrison’s analysis of those developing days of African dance is quite accurate but the political context to which he referred was more overt only in a small number of groups. As an expression of ‘self’, it was the form that made the statement. Many young blacks, whether they were successful or not within the British education system were making themselves visible through their positive commitment to African dance. African dance initiatives in other English regions were gradually finding space and

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Chester Morrison, Birmingham 13 April 1997.



In fact, since 1981 Merseyside has had a second dance company – Delado. While Spiral received considerable support from Merseyside Arts of more than £125,000 in two years, Delado has received virtually nothing and thrives.

It was formed in inner-city Liverpool following a visit by the London-based group Steel and Skin to celebrate the dancing, singing and drumming of Ghana. The group has made a name for themselves in the region and has toured all over the UK and to Paris.<sup>128</sup>

Politically, speeches by Enoch Powell and others were aggravating race relations and large sections of the black communities were becoming more politically astute and were positively promoting ‘self-worth’ and ‘self-esteem’ as vehicles to combat racism in society. The power of the drums, like it was in Africa and in the New World before was once again an instrument of resistance as dancers sent out messages of affirmation of ‘self’ as well as opposition to any form of racial domination and discrimination.

The restrictions on the development of African dance in those early days were largely around the lack of resources, and if public subsidy was being given at all, it was being given under conditions around financial management and development. Chester Morrison remembered that

.....we got pressurised into operating with, and there’s nothing wrong with that, the business culture. But economics became more important and people’s natural reaction is, if you are going to screw me for money, and accountability is only seen purely in financial terms enforced by funders, then I’m entitled to respond in financial terms. We were not responsible for creating that cultural environment in which economics was most important, but the funders have helped to create that by putting pressure on the organisers. So it’s not about artistic accountability, because in all the years they (the funders) did not have the knowledge to come and engage with us in a serious debate about the artistic progression and accountability. The only hassle was on the economic front.<sup>129</sup>

African dance tutors were criss-crossing the country but the lack of resources by many groups meant that only those with some form of support were able to flourish. Groups therefore were meeting informally and infrequently. In an effort to stem the decline in

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<sup>128</sup> Bill Harpe, ‘Ethnic feet on the beat’, *The Guardian*, 3 December 1986, p.11.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Chester Morrison, Birmingham 13 April 1997.

the young and growing dance sector and formalise networks and co-ordinate the development of African dance in England, a small group of individuals began meeting to share ideas about the longer-term prospects for the art form. By then some key players in the dance arena had already taken bold decisions and actions to develop the forms in the UK in a more cohesive manner and international study visits and exchanges were integrated into dance development in the UK.<sup>130</sup> The cynosure for this development was the Midlands generally, Birmingham specifically, due to the numbers of performing companies in the region.

**(iii) Phase Three: 1984 – 2003**

Although the infrastructure for African dance was non-existent at this time, dance groups and companies were lunging forward with enthusiasm and there was regional competition for public subsidy and resources between these dance companies. The CAVE decided to initiate a programme of discussions and took a leading role in this developmental period. It was the collaborative efforts of Chester Morrison, Derek Anderson, Hermin McIntosh, George Dzikunu, Charles Washington and myself who worked towards the establishment of an organisation to promote African dance in England. The Black Dance Development Trust<sup>131</sup> came into existence in 1984 and its critical role to African dance development in the UK will be reviewed in chapter four.

Africans from the Caribbean were committed as practitioners to the development of African dance in the UK whilst continental Africans played a pivotal role throughout, primarily as tutors and choreographers. George Dzikunu in particular was working with

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<sup>130</sup> In 1980 (six weeks) and 1983 (eighteen weeks), I had led and resourced two international programmes to Jamaica and Ghana respectively for young dancers and musicians from Birmingham. Following the Jamaican visit, I arranged annual scholarships for musicians and dancers from Birmingham to study at the Centre for Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica.

<sup>131</sup> The critical role of the BDDT in terms of completing the circle with Africa and all its core societal values in dance will be discussed later in this chapter.



several dance companies throughout the country. He had arrived from Ghana in the 70s with his group *Sankofa* and having decided to remain in the UK, joined Steel an' Skin in 1979. A few years later, he established his own company, *Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble*. The establishment of *Adzido*<sup>132</sup> signalled a completely new era in African dance in two distinct areas. Firstly it was the largest, building-based African dance company in England and was led by an African from the continent and secondly,

Adzido was founded in 1984 by George Dzikunu (Artistic Director) with a pioneering vision to produce work on a large scale using the best possible facilities for production, designing and staging the work and collaborating with leading artists and companies.<sup>133</sup>

*Adzido*'s focus on large-scale productions meant that after Les Ballets Negres, this company was only the second African or Caribbean dance company to produce work for large venues in the UK. The pioneering work that Dzikunu was involved in from the 1970s enabled him to understand the needs of the market and the company's mission statement encapsulated his own vision for African dance development.

Adzido Pan Africa Dance Ensemble exists to promote the appreciation, understanding and practice of African peoples dance, its music and its cultural heritage, in Britain and abroad. Adzido seeks to promote the richly diverse heritage of all cultural groups of Black Africa by presenting dance, together with music, in forms which both respect and illuminate traditional values and have relevance in a contemporary, multi-cultural context.<sup>134</sup>

Africa's music and dance represented Africa's traditional values and through performances, workshops, exhibitions and lecture demonstrations, *Adzido* began to share the richness of the cultural traditions from Africa. Through their productions, the company engaged audiences and performers in new experiences and through their choreographic approach, (directly involving the audiences in the performances) like many of the other companies in this phase, reduced the barriers between the observed

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<sup>132</sup> Pronounced 'Ah-jee-doe'.

<sup>133</sup> Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, 'Company Information', *Promotional Material*, 1985, p.1.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.* p.1.

and observer. Audiences were an integral part of the creative arts and the inter-connectivity between both was paramount to a successful performance.

The repertoire of the company embraced the diversity of dance forms across the continent and their large scale productions included *In the Village of Africa* (1986), *Coming Home* (1988), *Under African Skies* (1990), *Siye Goli* (1992), *Akwaaba* (1993), and *Thand' Abantwana* (1995). Small-scale productions included *Behind The Mask* (1993) and *Shango the God of Thunder* (1996). Dzikunu was born into the Ewe community in Ghana and was steeped in the rituals and symbols of his group's traditions. He was able to crystallise his own values through movement and music and later in his own professional company, was able to utilise his spirituality in creating work for the stages in England. He shared ideas and concepts that increased awareness and highlighted the spirituality of traditional African values. In their production of *Sankofa*, the company's promotional material noted that

Sankofa is a concept of retrieval and progress from the Ashanti nation of West Africa which has many levels of meaning for people of all cultures. Sankofa is the name of the phoenix-like bird which travels to retrieve all feathers it has shed, before continuing its journey. As we enter a new century, Adzido's Sankofa focuses minds on the traditions and rites of passage which give life structure and purpose, to energise spiritual growth.<sup>135</sup>

This period also witnessed new dynamics in African dance development in England. Whereas in the first two phases the leading practitioners were mostly from the Caribbean, from 1984 to the present time, the focus shifted to continental Africans. The Caribbean pioneers, especially the 'giggers' and 'dance acts' were ageing gracefully and the more established African – Caribbean companies, were now involved in strategies for longer-term survival.

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<sup>135</sup> Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, 'Repertoire', *Promotional Material*, 1985, p.1.





Shango - The God of Thunder. Adzido 12 (1996). Photo: Peter Williams



In addition to *Adzido*, Peter Badejo (*Badejo Arts*) and Bode Lawal (*Sakoba*) from Nigeria established African dance companies that offered new perspectives on West African dance forms. Like Dzikunu, these Artistic Directors were highly skilled, trained dancers. In the programme notes of his 2001 production *Night Song*, Bode Lawal wrote

I do not know where my dance theatre is going, but I believe that I am firmly in touch with my roots, and the spiritual aspect of my creativity is always guiding me and driving me forward.....and it is certainly a forward journey I am travelling. When I arrived in England in 1986, I never guessed my new company Sakoba will still be here fifteen years on, flourishing and growing, despite all the obstacles.<sup>136</sup>

Beverley Glean, a graduate dancer, had by then formed IRIE! Dance theatre to maintain the African Caribbean input. By 1986, besides the overt thrust of traditional African values through performances, Lancel Afrikan Arts was successful in forming a relationship with Wolverhampton Polytechnic (now Wolverhampton University) that also gave a religious and spiritual context to African dance practice. Ann Fitzgerald, from a conversation with their Artistic Director Chester Morrison reported

Lancel Afrikan Arts Company are at their regular Friday night rehearsal at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. The initiative to bring the two together was set up in May '86 and both parties hope to benefit.

The company are giving lectures, performances and workshops on some of the modular courses leading to the BA (Humanities) degree (particularly the new module in Afro-Caribbean arts), the Diploma of Higher Education course and the B.Ed. degree for students training to be teachers.<sup>137</sup>

The African dance movement peaked in the 80s with formal and informal groups numbering over forty. Today the numbers of practitioners and companies have been greatly reduced, although the professional companies remaining are better supported via the public subsidy arts system. This position is not unique to African dance as “once

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<sup>136</sup> Bode Lawal, 'Night Songs', *Sakoba Dance Theatre Programme*, October 2001.

<sup>137</sup> Ann Fitzgerald, 'Straw in the wind of change', *The Stage*, December 1986.



there were 18 revenue-funded black and Asian theatre companies, now there are two”.<sup>138</sup>

In September 1987, Anne Millman researched and produced a useful and comprehensive report on *African People's Dance: The State of the Art*. As far as funding to the sector was concerned, Millman reported that

....as the majority of companies receive little or no funding, this (confidentiality) is not a major omission. Overall, the highest level of recorded funding in 1985/6 was £54,000, and the lowest a £300 project grant. The latter is more typical of the funding levels of most companies.<sup>139</sup>

Millman's report produced a wide range of recommendations that the sector was already aware of but more importantly her findings underscored the paltry sums of public subsidy that was given to black dance. Regardless of the low funding levels to the art forms, these findings also highlighted how black dance was perceived by audiences in comparison to other dance forms. Table 5 is reproduced from the Millman Report. Millman herself added that “..the image of Black dance is very similar to that of ballet and contemporary dance. However, the dimensions claimed to be exclusive to Black dance are the ‘exuberant’, ‘distinct’ and ‘compelling’ elements”.<sup>140</sup>

Millman's report was very positively received by the African and Caribbean dance sector at the time, and although the findings directly influenced the recommendations in other reports and discussions from the Arts Council,<sup>141</sup> public subsidy to black dance remained relatively poor and erratic for several years. Although as shown in the table above, dance attenders (black and white) favourably compared black dance to other

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Billington, ‘White out’, *The Guardian*, 18 October 2000, p.14.

<sup>139</sup> Anne Millman, ‘Africa People's Dance: The State of the Art’, Research Findings September 1987, p.11.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.* p.40.

<sup>141</sup> Millman's report was acknowledged as the basis for recommendations for African and Caribbean dance in Graham Devlin's *Stepping Forward* (1989), the latter also informing the Arts Council's own national review/discussion – National Arts and Media Strategy (dance) in 1991.

popular dance forms in England, it was interesting to note the comments of black non-dance attenders. According to Millman

The Black Non-Attenders claimed that Black dance always “portrays poverty and suffering”, it “sticks to traditions” and is “getting us back”. It is not enjoyable because it “never shows the nice side of Africa”, it is “never cheerful” and “not new, creative or entertaining”. As these respondents had not attended a Black dance performance these perceptions are obviously culled from a variety of sources as publicity image media coverage.<sup>142</sup>

**TABLE 5**  
**Audience Perceptions of various Dance Genres**

Ballet	Contemporary	Black Dance
Interpretation of story	Interpretation of music/feelings	Interpretation of story
Skilful/Professional	Physical strength	Vigour/energy/exuberance
Ritualized/rigid	Creative/original	Distinct
Graceful	Abstract	Compelling
Cold	Expressive	Expressive
White tights/tutus	Variety of costumes	Colourful costumes
Tchaikovsky	Modern/electronic music	Drumming/rhythms
Established	Modern	Cultural/Ethnic
Entertaining/enjoyable	Entertaining/enjoyable	Entertaining/enjoyable

European historical reports, and its mis-representation of black cultural traditions had also registered these thoughts in their minds.

Appendix 2 is the first attempt in England to present a schematic chart showing some of the key players involved in traditional Caribbean and African music and dance since the 1940s. Not all of those included were directly involved in dance but all certainly made a

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.* p.42.



significant contribution to the maintenance and promotion of black cultural traditions and directly and indirectly supported the thrust of the Black dance movement during the last fifty years. As there is a dearth of written information of this specific period, this first attempt will no doubt be added to and improved in the years ahead, as the black communities begin to re-write their own histories of dance development in the UK. The classification is a rather crude, short-handed method offered towards an understanding of black dance history in England.

The third phase of African dance development in England however was unlike any of the previous phases. It was grounded in practice that benefited from theoretical input and the intellect and wisdom of many of the greatest dancers, choreographers and tutors from the Caribbean and Africa. Dancers and musicians during this period were exposed to and benefited from the rich cultural traditions of Africa and the Caribbean through the realisation and establishment of the BDDT.

During the early to mid-nineties, public awareness and, to some extent, public subsidy was growing for the African dance sector, but promoters and venues were not as keen due to the lack of what they considered to be quality work for the middle to large scale venue. McCann Mathews Millman reported in 1994 that

Seven or more years ago promoters, dance specialists and journalists had strongly-held opinions about African and Caribbean work, and were very ready to share those opinions. In 1994 many of these same people are far less willing to commit themselves, particularly about artistic content. Some, who are paid to write, think and make decisions about dance, refused to comment.<sup>143</sup>

The lack of genuine investment in African and Caribbean dance development was surfacing with detrimental affects. The productions by some of the companies were

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<sup>143</sup> McMann Matthews Millman, 'Developing Audiences for African and Caribbean Dance', Conclusions and Recommendations, August 1994, p.4.

interesting though not artistically creative but the companies themselves could not have solely shouldered the particular burden. The African dance sector was fragmented and under-resourced and numerous attempts to bring venues and promoters together with the key players in the sector were always met with opposition from the former groups. Realistically, *black dance companies were producing work for black communities throughout England but then attempting to market their product to middle scale and large white venues*. Quality standards were variable and market research was non-existent. McMann et al, highlighted three areas in which they recommended artistic improvements by companies, although cautioning ACE and Board of Directors from black companies to approach the matter delicately.

The first consideration is that of introspection, lack of freshness, and indistinct identities.

Secondly, the perception (or reality) that the standards of presentation and delivery are variable,.....

Thirdly, direct and consistent criticisms of the texts and narrative employed, and of acting standards,....<sup>144</sup>

Their conclusions were valid, though locating black dance development within the wider context of white society and of dance development in England generally, would have provided a better basis from which to discuss and advance the forms. Although the black dance sector was extremely active, there were very few professional companies operating and hence venues were limited as to products and companies. Often, if one company did not reach up to the *expectations* of the venue (quality of product, marketing support, punctuality etc.), that outcome coloured the venue's judgement in terms of working with other black companies. As venues and promoters, almost exclusively white, shared information regularly, one group's faults affected the entire sector. Additionally, venues and promoters, once they had booked one black dance company in the year, were reluctant to have another, given their belief that all the

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<sup>144</sup> *ibid.* p.5.



companies were producing similar work and their audiences had already seen their 'black quota'.

But these were not the only reasons why black dance was at crossroads. By 1996 The Arts Council of England had produced its strategy for dance in *The Policy for Dance in the English Funding system* and whereas in previous reports and policy documents from ACE African and Caribbean dance and Asian dance were normally noted for needing specific support, this was not the case. The Policy highlighted five strategic areas for prioritising dance – supporting dance, dancers, creativity, the national infrastructure and the dance economy. Additionally, there was an expressed preference for generic, national Dance Agencies. African dance or culture-specific organisations for dance were not noted as a necessity for development of black dance in England. By then black visiting companies, especially The Dance Theatre of Harlem (USA) and smaller contemporary companies from Zimbabwe, Southern Africa and North America were having an impact on the dance scene in the UK. Understandably, the large dance venues were therefore happy to import quality, Western black dance products that realised 'profits' at the box office, something which lack of investment meant that British black dance was failing to do. In parallel, British black companies and individual choreographers, trained in Western techniques in England, were also creating new works for young British audiences and hence there were new opportunities for venues. African and Caribbean dancers and companies were now under greater threat in terms of public subsidy and also finding spaces to produce their work. Many of the African companies were not understanding the shift being made by promoters, venues and the funding agencies and thus were not engaging or being engaged in the debates about the future of African and Caribbean dance practice in England. Adzido Pan-African Ensemble and Kokuma, based in London and Birmingham respectively, were the

‘flagships’ for African and Caribbean dance production but both were stretched to the limits in terms of human and financial resources and both were being nudged into new directions.

Concomitantly, a new ‘brand’ of white, independent, managers, administrators, ‘bookers’ and tour managers emerged to lead the younger, black British contemporary dancers. This new ‘force’ had invariably grown out of the funding institutions themselves and besides being conversant with the various funding schemes and opportunities, shared a common history and language with those in the dance media and at the venues. During this period, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis from black dance practice to black people in dance.

## **(5) Funding Support to African and Caribbean Dance**

### **Organisations/Individuals**

Although erratic and paltry, there is no doubt that public subsidy, via the regional and now the national Arts Council, has been the major stabilising force in the existence of many companies presenting African and Caribbean programmes over the past twenty five years. Although companies still argue that their percentage of the public subsidy, in dance terms, has been extremely frugal and remains so, companies believe that public funding, covert or not, has also been used by some agencies to dictate and determine the future of African and Caribbean dance in the UK. Public subsidies however were not the central thrust for the establishment of many of these companies or for the development of African dance, for many were self-financing and then later sought the ‘social welfare path’ for their survival. Ekome Dance Company, Lancel Afrikan Arts and Adzido, pioneers and flagship companies, all began from personal and community contributions and then developed ‘work programmes’ under the Manpower Services



Commission Schemes (MSC) to help in the realisation of their artistic dreams. Thus the 'art' of African and Caribbean dance practice was *reduced* to 'workshops' and dance became a '9 to 5 product'.

Given that until recently most regional publicly funding arts agencies around the UK had their own regional systems and definitions for supporting African dance, collecting financial information by regions has been problematic and not particularly enlightening. In spite of this, financial details from Arts Council England and West Midlands have been examined from 1994/45 as a gauge to highlight public subsidy support for African dance development nationally. As will be seen from the ACE-funding snapshot in the table that follows, the Arts Council itself was uncertain about their support for African dance. Whereas Ballet Rambert, Sadler's Wells, Janet Smith Dancers, Phoenix Dance Company, Extemporary Dance Company and the Kosh, for example, were from their inception treated as dance companies and funded from the dance budget that was not the case for African dance. Dance, black arts organisations and carnival groups were generally shunted around under different categories, normally being placed in categories with much smaller budgets than the dance budget. As gleaned from various annual reports from ACE and other regions, it appears that financial support to the sector was non-existent between the 50s and the 70s (Phase I). In Phase II, during the mid-70s and 80s when public subsidy from ACE was granted to Steel and' Skin, funding was principally from the **Community Projects** budgets.

In 1984 the Arts Council declared "the strategy's basic recommendations, some of which are already being implemented, include.....reinforcing for the administrative back-up for the growing number of Asian and African dance groups;...".<sup>145</sup> By 1987/88

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<sup>145</sup> *Arts Council 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Report and Accounts 1984/85*. p.7. The strategy being referred to was the Dance Panel's 'The Development of Dance and Mime in England'.

the established companies were being funded under **Dance of Ethnic Minorities** and in 1988/89 and 1989/90 *Adzido* and the *BDDT* appeared under the **Dance** budget, with the other dance companies being funded under **Cultural Diversity Dance Projects, Dance Blueprint** and **Dance and Education Outreach**. Into the 90s and there was change again, as the major recipients of dance grants from ACE were singled out as ‘National’ and ‘Revenue’ clients and all other dance companies, including some African companies, were now under the **Annual Clients** category, **Dance Projects, Dance Education and Outreach** and **New Initiatives**. Regardless of the categories, African companies received a much smaller slice of public funding and for shorter periods of time, compared to ‘similar’ ballet and contemporary companies. The table below shows the year, the organisations funded, the category, the amount to each company/organisation with the final column giving the total budget of the specific category. There were several other categories with separate dance budgets but as these reflected no awards to any black companies they were not included. These included New Dance, Touring Fund, Awards to composers for dance and Performance Arts. In the cases of *Badejo Arts*, *Koromanti Arts* and *Kokuma*, a snapshot of their funding is included within the text in those particular sections of the thesis. Juggling funds and constantly completing application forms for additional support became a permanent way of life for many of these companies and without adequate support to anchor the companies administratively, most companies (as will be evidenced in the case of *H. Patten Dance Theatre* and *Badejo Arts*) trundled on trying to satisfy both their artistic and organisational goals.

In more recent times, the debates about public subsidy for African companies have been muted although there are two critical points that still aggravate the African dance sector. In the first instance, individuals and companies believe that the public funding system



deliberately keeps them in a 'queue' for a very much longer period of time *before they receive any public acknowledgment or any public subsidy*. Amongst many African and Caribbean performers there is an amount of disquiet, especially as their perception of the funding agency's role, is that of encouraging the 'new, black British dancer' to apply for public subsidies quite early in their careers, whereas companies like *Kokuma, Irie and Adzido* had to wait for several years before they received any significant contribution, hence closures, stabilisation programmes and lack of consistent and coherent development.

Secondly, African dance companies are unable to attract major sponsorship deals, are less likely to receive huge sums at the box office, are more likely to accept box-office splits rather than a guaranteed professional fee and are normally performing in small scale, under-resourced venues. Overall their abilities to generate enormous amounts of income are minimal, hence often when public subsidy ceases, the individual performer or company is engulfed in a crisis and is forced to disband. African practitioners believe that if there was a visionary public subsidy system with a more strategic approach to the sector, much of the current crisis could have been avoided.

**TABLE 6**

**Arts Council Funding To Black Dance Companies**

D = Dance  
D & M = Dance & Mime  
E P = Experimental Projects  
E O = Equal Opportunities  
D B = Dance Blueprint  
D P = Dance Projects  
C D D P = Cultural Diversity Dance Projects

A C & C P = Arts Centres & Community Projects  
D E M = Dance of Ethnic Minorities  
C P = Community Projects  
Annual = Annual Clients  
N I = New Initiatives  
D E & O = Dance Education & Outreach

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>ORGANISATION</u>	<u>ACE</u> <u>FUNDING</u>	<u>AMOUNT</u> <u>(£)</u>	<u>TOTAL ACE</u> <u>EXPENDITURE</u>
1975/76	Steel an' Skin W.I. Carnival Ctte	A C & C P	9,270 500	D = 855,000 A C & C P = 581, 362
1976/77	Awake/Adwe MAAS Ogunde's Folk Gr Steel an' skin Carnival groups	A C & C P	7,500 5,000 2,000 11,000 10,500	D = 1,013,259 A C & C P = 635,758
1977/78	Black Theatre Workshop MAAS Movers Awake/Adwe MAAS Ogunde Steel an' Skin	D & M   A C & C P	2,000  760 2,500 5,000 4,400 20,500	D = 1,218,474   A C & C P = 741,545



	Sugumugu Sunday		3,500	
	Carnival groups		14,500	
1978/79	MAAS Movers	D & M	1,820	D = 1,469,154
		A C & C P		A C & C P =1,038,450
	Awake/Adwe		5,000	
	Ekome		1,000	
	MAAS		5,500	
	Ogunde		5,500	
	Steel an' Skin		31,800	
	Sugumugu Sunday		4,900	
	Carnival groups		20,800	
1979/80	Aklowa	D & M	3,380	D & M = 1,729,045
	MAAS Movers		5,000	
		A C & C P		A C & C P =1,073,294
	Ekome		2,000	
	MAAS		10,000	
	Ogunde		6,000	
	Steel an' Skin		40,750	
	Sugumugu Sunday		5,000	
	Carnival groups		18,600	
	The Drum Arts Centre		4,385	
1980/81	MAAS Movers	D & M	360	D & M = 1,955,434
	Aklowa	A C & C P	5,790	A C & C P= 1,115,800

	Ekome		7,000	
	Steel an' Skin		40,000	
	Sugumugu Sunday		5,000	
	Trinbago Carnival		8,480	
1981/82	Aklowa	A C & C P	12,500	D & M = 2,424,502
	Ekome		16,500	A C & C P= 1,073,153
	Steel an' Skin		34,840	
		E P		E P = 78,250
	Lanzel Afrikan Arts		3,500	
	MAAS Ltd		14,000	
1982/83	Aklowa	A C & C P	13,000	D & M = 2,706,741
	Ekome		20,500	A C & C P= 1,179,280
	Steel an' Skin		33,930	
		E P		
	MAAS Ltd		15,000	
	Carnival Ltd		30,000	
1983/84	Aklowa	A C & C P	17,000	D & M = 2,875,360
	Ekome		37,000	A C & C P=1,186,456
	Lanzel Afrikan Arts		5,000	
	Steel an' Skin		38,400	
	Carnival groups		35,198	
1984/85		A C & C P		D & M = 3,061,103



	Aklowa		15,600	A C & C P=1,243,078
	Ekome		40,500	
	Lanzel		9,00	
	Steel an' Skin		42,000	
	MAAS		9,578	
	Carnival groups		35,860	
1985/86		D & M		D & M = 3,583,188
	BDDT	4,000		C P = 288,575
	Kokuma	2,000		
		C P		
	Caribbean Focus	5,000		
	Ekome	40,000		
	Janako Arts	2,000		
	Steel an' Skin	42,800		
	MAAS	17,300		
	Carnival groups	38,000		
1987/88				D & M = 9,776,250
		D E M		D E M = 119,000
	Adzido		17,500	E O = 43,880
	BDDT		21,500	
	CAVE Arts Centre		4,000	
	Delado Dance Co		12,500	
	Irie Dance Co		5,000	
	Kokuma		24,700	
		E O		
	MAAS	20,500		
	BDDT	2,500		

	Battimamzel Dance Theatre	5,000		
1988/89	Adzido BDDT  Adzido BDDT Irie Kokuma	D  D E M	30,000 35,000  500 2,000 20,000 37,000	D = 10,552,898  D E M = 132,800
1989/90	Adzido BDDT  Irie Kokuma Irie Adzido	D  C D D P  D E & O D B	105,640 35,730  10,020 40,030 3,515 25,000	D = 11,500,300  C D D P = 171,716  D E & O = 88,180 D B = 65,611
1990/91	Adzido BDDT Kokuma  Ebo Iye Irie	ANNUAL  D P  D E & O	287,600 38,550 47,000  28,000 21,000	D = 13,019,510  ANNUAL = 901,550  D P = 589,560  D E & O = 63,763



	H Patten		2,000	
	Irie		3,000	
	Kokuma		2,500	
		N I		N I = 9,000
	Kokuma		9,000	

By 1991/92 there were the signs of a shift by the major funding agencies. More British born black and South Asian dance companies and choreographers were beginning to receive public subsidy at a range of levels and African and Caribbean dance companies were numerically diminishing. With the restructure of the Arts Council in 2002 to become one national body, it was more difficult to access dance budgets. The following however are included, although it is acknowledged that these must only be a part of the total picture. Equally, there are significantly less African dance practitioners receiving public subsidy currently but an increase in black dancers in contemporary dance.

<u>ACE Annual Report 2002/03</u>	£
Badejo Arts (ACE capital Technical Assistance, DA)	70,000
Carl Campbell Dance Company (London)	25,450
Adzido (Stabilisation & Recovery)	471,230
ACE Dance Company (Birmingham, Touring)	55,000

<u>ACE Annual Report 2003/04</u>	
ACE Dance Company (Birmingham, Touring)	55,000
ACE Dance Company	98,000
Kajans Enterprise (B’ham, includes some dance)	31,437
Badejo Arts (Development Programme, DA)	200,000
Irie (Touring)	50,000

Public subsidy to the African dance sector is without doubt diminishing, with the net result that the desire to see more quality work produced in the UK work remaining a wish rather than a reality. Lack of infrastructure development, too few skilled choreographers and lack of organised professional companies continue to plague the sector. In a personal letter of invitation to his new production Aseju (Excess), Bode Lawal blames practitioners for the failure to take the forms forward and then outlines how he intends to move forward with Contemporary African dance. His letter is passionate with a germ of truth and reflects that the African dance sector is flexible, adaptable and accommodating and with open and honest dialogue, will continue to make a powerful contribution to British arts and culture. This quote, of necessity, is longer than customary.

The fault, however lies squarely at the feet of African dance practitioners who have not shown the courage to change or break the mould; those that are happy to have their work seen purely as cultural tourism.

..native African dance must move on, must evolve in order to survive as with everything else. If you visit Nigeria and go to a nightclub, would you expect to see people dancing around a fire in loin cloths or grass skirts? No. African dance must reflect today's society. That said, we have no intention of turning our backs on the rich tradition that makes us what we are.

To facilitate this growth, I recently took an 18 month sabbatical at the University of California, Los Angeles where I was invited both to teach and to research. My ultimate aim there was to formulate and define a new dance vocabulary which encompasses the traditions of African dance but with a depth which visibly shows the intellectual and spiritual aspects of the genre in a way which removes any doubt.

I wanted to show that African dance does not have to be limited by its own stereotypes. I wanted to make it more accessible to a wider audience. I wanted to show that it is not stuck in a time warp. That it can progress and develop as do pure contemporary styles. I wanted African dance to be taken seriously and not as an amusing fairground attraction.

This new piece aims to introduce and demonstrate these objectives. It is unlike anything you have seen before. It is so much more than a fusion of styles. It's brand new!! It is a dance language in itself which captures aspects of many schools of thought. It is not merely a plethora of techniques blindly thrown together. It has been formulated, considered, mused over and developed from a



blank canvass. More importantly – it is only the beginning. I hope you enjoy it.<sup>146</sup>

Where Bode Lawal is stressing the need to be artistically responsive to changes in the current dance environment in this new century, the BDDT was pivotal in its role to educate and provide professional development for African dance practitioners towards the end of the last century. Chapter four focuses on the work on two organisations (The BDDT and Kokuma Dance Company) that made major contributions to African dance development in the UK and includes an assessment of how the lessons learnt from their demise could be utilised in the light of the possible establishment of a new support agency for African dance in London, DanceAfrica.

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<sup>146</sup> Sakoba Dance Theatre – The First Post-Modern African Dance Company. February 2005.